INSIDE THE CULT OF SLEEP TOKEN

METAL HAMMER

"I HAD TO RID MYSELF OF THE THINGS THAT NO LONGER MAKE ME HAPPY"

HALESTORM

HOW LZZY BECAME QUEEN OF EVERYTHING

METALLICA
LOAD: MASTERPIECE OR MISFIRE?

PRESIDENT
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KORN
ON POODLES, PARAKEETS AND BEARDED DRAGONS

DARON MALAKIAN
"SYSTEM WOULD GET BOOED OFFSTAGE"

PLUS! DEICIDE • **NERVOSA**
BLOODYWOOD • **MAX CAVALERA**

FUTURE
ISSUE 403

BLEED FROM WITHIN
DIMMU BORGIR • PALEFACE SWISS

BIRMINGHAM ROYAL BALLET

Director Carlos Acosta

Sofia Libares. © Perou. Illustration © Beth Ingleton

The Heavy Metal dance experience

Black Sabbath – The Ballet

September / October 2025

Birmingham
Salford
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"a stunning spectacle"
Metal Hammer

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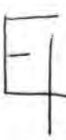
HALE TO THE QUEEN

LZZY HALE HAS become metal's go-to personality. From fronting Skid Row, to playing Ozzy/Sabbath's final show, to getting her photo plastered across a Times Square Billboard for chairing a Spotify summit about women in metal, and appearing in a Judas Priest documentary, Halestorm's singer has become the queen of... well, everything!

But, as the woman herself tells our Merlin Alderslade, backstage in Budapest while on tour with Maiden, she's been on a long journey to get here. Following a drunken episode after the band's career-high show at London's Wembley Arena in 2023, she gave up alcohol, and started the process of working through the depression she'd been experiencing for a while. As she puts it: "I was looking for an escape in all the wrong places."

Reflecting Lzzy's difficult climb upwards, not to mention the band's near-three-decade career ascent, new album *Everest* is Halestorm's most diverse offering yet, and sees them at the peak of their powers. Get excited.

Stay metal,



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SCAN TO GET OUR WEEKLY NEWSLETTER

MEET THE BAND

MERLIN ALDERSLADE
WRITER
Former *Hammer* editor/current Louder executive editor Merlin jetted off to Budapest to see Halestorm take on Maiden's opening night crowd. No shoes were thrown! Then he had a nice, existential chat with the one and only Lzzy.

KATJA OGRIN
PHOTOGRAPHER
The wonderful Katja returned to Download for us to shoot all the mayhem, from Battlesnake's silly outfits to Korn crushing their main stage headline debut. And from everyone at *Hammer*, happy 1st birthday to Eddie the cat!

JEREMY SAFFER
PHOTOGRAPHER
Jeremy shot Bleed From Within at a ridiculously cool rooftop venue in New York, as the Scots took on the Trivium/Bullet crowds against Manhattan's famous skyline. His incredible photos did not make us jealous. At all...

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76 FLORIDA DEATH METAL

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SPECIAL!

KATJA OGRIN

THE BIG PICTURE

LET THERE BE FROCK

DOWNLOAD 2024 MIGHT have been a case of mud, sweat and tears, but that was all forgotten as the sun shone gloriously over Donington this June – see our review on p.92. Download 2025 was a real step up, as most bands started on time, facilities were improved and the vibe was on point. But while a lot of talk was dedicated to first-time headliners Green Day, Sleep Token and Korn, the undercard proved equally fascinating.

The weekend had barely got underway when Aussies Battlesnake played the Dogtooth Stage on Friday afternoon – actually the band's second performance at the festival, following an appearance in The Den for early campers the day before. Dressed in their distinctive priestly get-up, complete with rhinestones, horns and wings, they spent the next half-hour leaping around like electrified gibbons and slinging old-school heavy metal riffs with zeal.

Ending with the most anarchic cover of AC/DC's *Let There Be Rock* you could ever hope to see – with members stripped to their pants, and guitarist Ben Frank soloing atop a moving flight case – it's safe to say that even as Download changes for a new generation, we all still love seeing something weird and wonderful.

DOWNLOAD 2021 SPECIAL!

THE BIG PICTURE

ARE YOU READY?

KORN. DOWNLOAD FESTIVAL. A match made in heaven. They've been playing at Donington for almost 30 years, first popping up at Monsters Of Rock in '96, but apparently the 10th time is the charm as they finally headlined the main stage on Sunday June 15. And it was *glorious*. Kicking off with career-starter *Blind*, Korn's return to Download proved they're not just the granddaddies of nu metal – still leaving an undeniable impression on rising stars who played across the weekend, such as Kim Dracula, Poppy and Jinjer – but a band who should have been headlining this festival years ago.

With only *Cold* from 2019's *The Nothing* to represent their output in the last decade, Korn instead stuck to the classics. They pulled everything from tried-and-true reliables *Here To Stay*, *Got The Life* and *Shoots And Ladders* (complete with its Jonathan Davis bagpipe solo – the second bagpipe appearance of the day, following Bleed From Within's troupe) to classics that needed dusting off (*Twisted Transistor*, *Did My Time*), and all-conquering singalongs (*Y'all Want A Single*, *Falling Away From Me*, *Freak On A Leash*) to show everyone else how you do it. Thirty years in, and better than ever.

KATJA OGRIN

THE BIG PICTURE

WHAT ABOUT US?

HOW HAS IT been a decade since Within Temptation headlined a UK festival? Granted, the Dutch symphonic metal giants didn't *quite* get top billing – and had to compete with the latter half of Weezer's set on main stage – but seeing their epic set on the Opus Stage was a reminder of how well-adapted to big stages they are now. From set design (think an ancient amphitheatre) to a dazzling light show, dramatic costumes (Sharon wore an opera-style mask to start the set), impassioned speeches *and* massive anthems (*We Go To War*, *Bleed Out*, *Paradise (What About Us?)*, *Don't Pray For Me*, *Mother Earth* – pick your poison) it was all the evidence we needed to ask why they aren't headlining stages more often.

In the 10 years since Within Temptation headlined Bloodstock, it still feels like festivals have a long way to go to gender-balance their line-ups. But Download 2025 certainly wasn't lacking, with the likes of Gore., Poppy, Spiritbox, Jinjer and Sophie Lloyd pulling massive crowds across the weekend.

Will we finally get a woman headlining Download's main stage in 2026? Time will tell...

DOWNLOAD
2011
SPECIAL!
KATJA OGRIN

THE HOT TOPIC

ROCK THE KASBAH

Twenty years ago, Amine Hamma was arrested for playing in a death metal band. Now he's helping build Morocco's metal scene with the Tricinty Festival

WORDS: RICH HOBSON • PICTURES: FZ BELLALIJ

Spanish thrashers Angelus Apatrida played this year's Tricinity festival

Amine Hamma: lifer!

METAL HAS EXISTED in Morocco for almost 30 years. Despite that, the scene is still in its relative infancy, few international bands ever playing the country while even local acts can struggle to get gigs. But Amine Hamma is looking to change that. One of the organisers of the Tricinty Festival, Morocco's first dedicated metal festival, Amine is helping to shape the future of his country's metal scene.

"People come from all across Morocco to attend Tricinty," Amine says. "But this event is growing and becoming a beautiful platform to showcase local bands. My ambition is to help bands get over to Europe and sign record deals."

The first Tricinty Festival was held in April 2023, at the Cinéma Renaissance in the Moroccan capital Rabat. Four local bands were invited to play to a few hundred metal fans to commemorate the release of a compilation Amine had made of bands from across Morocco, spanning styles from grunge and death metal to Amazigh rock, a subgenre that mixes rock, metal and traditional Berber folk music.

"WE'RE NOT JUST INTO CAMELS AND PALM TREES"

"We realised there was a real need, not just to give these bands a stage, but to bring the rock and metal community together," Amine explains. "It gives Moroccan bands a reason to rehearse for something bigger, and opens up new opportunities to perform."

Amine's passion is more than just a hobby – it's something he's pursued for decades. He first discovered rock and metal via satellite TV in the early 90s, watching videos of Metallica and Nirvana. By the time nu metal blew up in the mid-90s, an alternative scene had formed around tape-trading networks, allowing Amine and his friends to discover thrash and death metal and form their own bands, Amine first playing in Immortal Spirit in '96 before forming Reborn in the early 2000s.

It wasn't all smooth sailing, however. In 2003, Amine and 13 other metalheads were arrested and charged with "shaking the foundations of the Islamic faith", receiving prison sentences for their activities playing in bands and helping promote the scene.

"We went to jail for playing heavy metal," Amine admits. "They came in and took a load of my shirts and CDs, which really hurt because we didn't have that many record stores so I'd spent a long time building my collection! The authorities didn't really understand us. They just saw ties between Satanism and heavy metal."

Although things looked bleak for a moment, intervention came from an unlikely place – King Mohammed VI helped secure the prisoners' release and got the charges dropped. Amine admits a terrorist attack months later also softened the government and media's stance on metal – "After that, they wanted to know what their kids were making," he explains.

After his release, Amine moved to France, living in Europe for 11 years while he got his Master's Degree. There, he frequently attended shows and became involved in the organisation and running of events, even attending Hellfest when it was still known as Furyfest. By the time he moved back to Morocco in 2014, he was passionate about promoting his home country's scene and created a compilation of bands from across the rock and metal spectrum, ultimately founding Tricinty almost a decade later.

Tricinty may be Morocco's only dedicated metal festival, but it isn't the only event to invite metal bands over. The Boulevard Festival, hosted in Casablanca, has also hosted bands like Sepultura, Moonspell, Gojira and Kreator in previous years.

"But one festival is not enough," Amine insists. "When we first got

PRESS/(C) FZ BELLALIJ, AMINE PORTRAIT: PRESS/KAMAR MANSOUR

Getting the green light: the festival in full swing

Kreator over, I remember people cried and it was like, 'Come on, it's Kreator not Justin Bieber!'"

Tricinty has grown since its inception in 2023. Working as part of the HIBA Foundation – a charity set up by King Mohammed VI to help promote and sustain the arts – and with organisations like the French Institute and Spanish embassy, Tricinty were able bring international bands to the festival for the first time in 2024. The festival grew even more for its third edition in 2025. Held on May 23 and 24 – the first time the festival has run over multiple days – it featured local bands Thrillogy, Mycose Of You, Old School and We Come For War as well as international acts including French post-metallers Klone, Spanish thrashers Angelus Apatrida and UK alt weirdos Sugar Horse. The event also featured a drum workshop with UK-based drummer Jack Wench and producer/sound engineer Chris Coulter, an air guitar competition – where the first prize was a brand new guitar – and an academic talk by Gérôme Guibert, a professor of Sociology who has co-authored multiple academic pieces exploring the world of metal.

Once again hosted at Rabat's Cinéma Renaissance, a short walk from major tourist attraction The Kasbah of the Udayas, the event attracted hundreds of metal fans to headbang, mosh and even stagedive over an orchestral pit in front of the stage.

"For some of these kids, this might be the only metal event they come to this year," Amine admits. "But it means a lot to us to get international bands over, too. They then can also act as ambassadors for our scene in Europe – 'Oh, there's metal in Morocco?' Yeah! We're not just into camels and palm trees."

FOLLOW TRICINTY ON INSTAGRAM TO LEARN MORE ABOUT THE FESTIVAL AND THE MOROCCAN METAL SCENE. VISIT TRICINTY.BANDCAMP.COM TO HEAR AMINE'S COMPILATIONS OF MOROCCAN BANDS

HAMMER STEREO

What's been blowing our office speakers

HALESTORM
Everest
"A powerhouse album from a powerhouse of a band"
ELEANOR GOODMAN
EDITOR

IMHA TARIKAT
Redefining Darkness
"Wrestles the roots of black metal into a thrillingly high-stakes, heart-in-fist, personal crusade"
JONATHAN SELZER
REVIEWS EDITOR

HALESTORM
Everest
"Stunning! Can't wait until they tour with Bloodywood in tow later this year!"
VANESSA THORPE
PRODUCTION EDITOR

HALESTORM
Everest
"Earworms for days"
LOUISE HILTON
ART EDITOR

PARADISE LOST
Ascension
"A nice bracing breeze of misery to beat the summer sun"
RICH HOBSON
STAFF WRITER

HELLOWEEN
Giants & Monsters
"Power metal OGs show the copycats how it's done"
DAVE EVERLEY
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

NAAN OR PARATHA?

Bloodywood mastermind Karan Katiyar takes your questions on Indian food, getting engaged at a gig, and rubber ducks

WORDS: MATT MILLS

WHEN *HAMMER* VIDEO-CALLS
Bloodywood guitarist/founder Karan Katiyar, the Indian nu metal sensations are two days away from jetting to the US for some shows with Babymetal. It'll mark the first time the guys have ever supported another artist on the road, which says everything about how quickly they've ascended through heavy metal's ranks.

Since rocketing to online fame with their souped-up Bollywood covers, Bloodywood have released two vibrant albums, packed countless venues and appeared on the soundtrack for Hollywood blockbuster *Monkey Man*, so it's high time they faced our readers' questions. You lot took full advantage of the opportunity, quizzing Karan on travel, going viral and whatever the hell 'metal tikka masala' is.

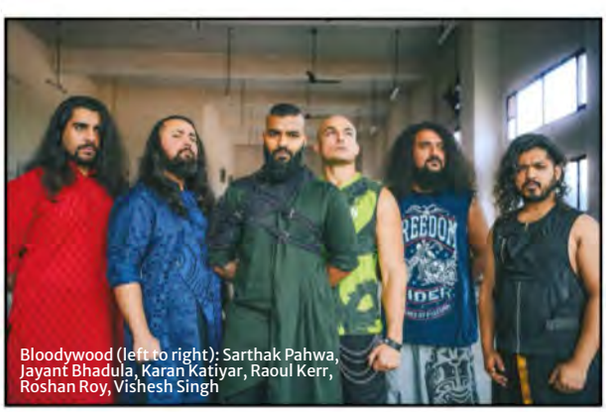
What's been your most memorable tour moment in recent years?
James_wakelin95, Instagram
"It was a show from our US tour in 2023. A person walked up to me and showed me the wallpaper on their phone. They said, 'Because of your music, I decided not to kill myself, and then I had this beautiful child. It's not just one life you've saved, it's two.' That's going to be my favourite moment forever."

What are your tips for going viral as a metal band?
Jack Qureshi, email
"That's a tough question, because it keeps changing. I'm not up to date on what's happening with social media right now, but start with the basics. As a metal band, your songs need to be really fucking good. Bad songs do not go viral in metal – that may happen in other genres, but not in metal."

Naan or paratha?
Stevie Tjhoong, Facebook
"Paratha. You can have it even when it's cold. Naan gets kind of stretchy. I don't like chewing too much. Ha ha!"

Jayant [Bhadula, vocals] says your band's music is like 'metal tikka masala'. What does that mean?
Ellie Fontaine, email
"Ha ha ha! That basically means it's going to be an explosion of flavours. It's going to be overwhelming, it might make you slightly uncomfortable, but the aftertaste is really fucking good."

What inspired you to play metal?
Eric_paolucci, Instagram
"When I got in my first moshpit, that's when I decided I wanted to play metal. Everyone was smiling and helpful, but also physically active, throwing people around. I loved it. I just wanted to make heavy music and make people push each other. I was the only guy in a white shirt, so I must have been the biggest target in that moshpit. Ha ha ha!"


Bloodywood (left to right): Sarthak Pahwa, Jayant Bhadula, Karan Katiyar, Raoul Kerr, Roshan Roy, Vishesh Singh

What other Indian bands should we check out?
Earthcapturesbyjoseph, Instagram
"Definitely check out Pineapple Express. They're my favourite band from India. Then there's a band called Skyharbor, but they're on hiatus. Gutslit are really good. And we just toured Europe with Demonic Resurrection."

Who's the world's best nu metal band?
George Clarkson, email
"My answer is slightly controversial, because this band aren't nu metal, but they use nu metal elements really well: I Prevail. One of my favourite tracks from them is called *Gasoline*. I'd 100% tour with them, but I don't know whether it would work out for them. We have very different audiences. It might not be a good move business-wise."

What do you think the future of rock and metal is in India?
Shivang.wav, Instagram
"It's very bright! Things are finally opening up here. We've got so many new festivals coming up. I'm seeing very young kids cover our songs and tag me in their reels. When I go to shows, there are kids telling me that, because of what's happening in the scene, they finally decided to make a band and try to pursue a career in music."

PRESS/ABHINAV SHARMA

"I PREVAIL ARE THE BEST NU METAL BAND IN THE WORLD"

Karan: bloody loves a moshpit

Karan just wants to make heavy music and make people push each other

How is the big rubber duck doing? [The crowd threw a giant duck onstage during a recent show in Germany.]
pascal_gd, Instagram
"Unfortunately, we had to give it back to the person who threw it. It was too big for us to take back to India! Ha ha!"

***Hammer*: What's the deal with ducks?**
"It's from our [2020] documentary, *Raj Against The Machine*. I used a quack sound effect to censor all of our foul language. It kind of became a meme. People show up with rubber ducks, drawings of ducks, way too many duck memes. At one show, someone threw a very large duck plushie onstage. Jayant got hold of it first and, when I tried to take it, his face was like if you stole candy from a kid! Ha ha ha!"

How do you write lyrics, especially the blending between English and Hindi?
ash64_, Instagram
"It's not hard, because we're not talking about two different things. Raoul [Kerr, vocals] has a great hold of the English language, so he knows how to express himself in the same way that Jayant does [in Hindi]. In India, everyone knows English. There's never any debate over which language gets used for each verse, but there is debate over which riff each guy gets to sing over. Ha ha ha! I can't say who wins those arguments more often. It's a draw!"

What's the biggest misconception people have about India?
Robbie Perez, email
"The worst misconception is that Indians are terrorists. We have no terror groups or extreme religious sects. There are some in our neighbouring countries, and they look like us, so I guess that's where that comes from. Another misconception is that we're unhygienic. That's not true. In some parts of India the streets are unhygienic, but the people are not. People in India generally bathe twice a day, and we're very particular about how clean our kitchen is and how clean our homes are."

What's the best bit of sightseeing you did when you played Japan?
Lailah Beech, email
"It was a place called Fushimi Inari in Kyoto. There are a lot of shrines on this mountain, and everyone's trying to get to the top, because there's an important shrine there. There are multiple paths you can take. You can take the touristy path or a path that goes through the forest. We took the path through the forest and came across so many shrines where it seemed like no one had seen them for years, but they weren't dusty or old. They were very well maintained, but there was no one there."

Will you collaborate with more bands from around the world?
Jonathan Aaron Bridgemohan, Facebook
"We'd love to. We each have our own favourites, and we hope to get to a point where it won't be a shot in the dark. Collaborating with Babymetal [on *Bekhauf* and *Kon! Kon!*] was great. Even though it probably didn't expose them to as many new people as it exposed us to, the songs that we wrote were great."

***Hammer*: What bands do you personally hope to collaborate with?**
"I've already mentioned I Prevail, right? Bring Me The Horizon is another big one. I'm really into an artist called Spiro, he's an insane guitar player. If we do collaborate with him on a song, it's going to be such a contrast between excellent guitar playing and the world's OK-est guitar playing. Ha ha ha!"

How nervous were you before proposing onstage [during a Japanese tour in May]? What are the plans for the wedding?
Nick Giberti, email
"I was nervous about the fact she may have passed out, but I knew she was gonna say yes. As for plans, it depends how traditional we want to go. We don't want an elaborate thing. Just the people closest to us, maybe somewhere in Goa, which is where I was born. We haven't discussed it much because we want to enjoy the engagement phase."

How did your parents react to you being in a metal band?
Nina Schriver, email
"My parents were never in favour of me pursuing music. Once, I was in college and my mum tried to pressure me into not playing a show with my band at the time. I told her, 'You should come to a show and see how it goes down.' The moment she agreed, I regretted asking her! Ha ha ha! I remember her entering, walking around the venue, and then stepping outside again. When I got back home, she sat me down and said, 'Who are these people that you're playing these shows for?' But with Bloodywood, now, they're happy. Ha ha ha! I don't have anything to worry about." H

BLOODYWOOD'S NEW ALBUM, *NU DELHI*, IS OUT NOW VIA FEARLESS. THE BAND TOUR EUROPE WITH HALESTORM IN OCTOBER AND NOVEMBER

KEVIN NIXON

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THE SLAYLIST

LISTEN NOW

PRIKA AMARAL

Raised on thrash and death metal, the chief screamer/shredder of Brazilian, er, thrash/death metallers Nervosa shares her fave songs

WORDS: RICH HOBSON • PICTURES: GREGORY DOURTOUNIS

"METALLICA WERE THE band that made me want to play guitar. I heard the guitar picking on *The Four Horsemen* and just thought, 'I need to learn how to do that.' Over the years, I think that's become one of the things I'm a specialist at. It has helped me grow as a guitarist; I'm self-taught, so it was difficult but so worth it.

"I'm a motorcycle girl, so **SAXON**'s *Wheels Of Steel* was the perfect song for me. I've been riding for about 13 years, but it can get pretty scary in Brazil. One year after I'd got my own motorcycle, I was at the lights in São Paulo when a guy came running out from robbing a bank. He saw me, put a gun in my face and stole my motorcycle. I managed to get it back after a week, so I was very lucky it wasn't stripped to pieces, but he'd used it to commit more crimes. He's in jail now though, so that's OK!

"**SEPULTURA** mean everything to Brazilian metalheads. Even the people who aren't sure about some of their songs, we all know a lot of attention paid to Brazilian bands now is because of them. I first heard Sepultura the same day I heard Slayer, and that groove is just so unique. I love the sound of *Propaganda*, and as a guitar nerd I just loved the double-picking at the start of the song, plus how angry Max's voice is. Our name is actually inspired by them too – Sepultura is a Portuguese word [for grave or tomb], so we decided to use 'Nervosa' for the female version of 'nervous'.

"**JUDAS PRIEST** are the kings of metal. When I was a teenager, I actually didn't like them because I was so into extreme music I basically ignored anything with melody. Huge mistake! Now Priest are one of my favourite bands and *Painkiller* is a perfect song. It made me pay attention to the drums more in songs – until then, I'd been obsessed with the guitars and how they worked.

"**SLAYER** are my favourite band ever and *Reign In Blood* is my favourite album. I remember sitting with my friends in a garage, listening to CDs we'd made from songs online, because that was pretty much the only way to discover things at that point. Where I grew up we didn't really have rock or metal bars you could go to and listen to music, so we'd just hang out at a friend's and drink. Then *Raining Blood* came on and changed my life. Now the best compliment I can get is when people tell me they can hear Slayer in Nervosa's sound.

"I was into thrash metal before I got into death metal, but **VADER** helped me discover that whole genre. Every time I hear *True Names*, I wish I could just sing and play drums at the same time. I always imitate the kick-drums, even though I definitely can't play them in real life! All of Vader's songs are incredible – Piotr Wiwczarek was a huge influence on me when I started singing. He's a crazy guy, singing in this very unique way that is brutal, and it's amazing. I love the whole of *Black To The Blind* – that album is what got me into the band.

"I really like the vibes of **BOLT THROWER**. They're so dark and they're not fast in the same way so many other death metal bands are. It's crazy, it's too fast to be doom, but it's super-heavy, and the first time I heard *...For Victory* I was hypnotised. On our first US tour, I was with [Conquer Divide drummer] Samantha Landa driving up to Canada, and *For Victory* just started playing on its own in the car on repeat. For hours. But we loved it, it was like a sign from the other side!

"**TESTAMENT** should be in the Big 4, for sure! Their entire discography is brilliant – *Over The Wall* has a definite Slayer vibe that edges it, though. Alex Skolnick is one of the most brilliant guitarists in all types of music, and since I took over as singer in Nervosa, I pay a lot more attention to their techniques too. Chuck Billy has a great vocal range with these incredible tones and ways of singing, all of it very natural and not forced. They're a band with equilibrium – heaviness, melody... they do it all.

"I love all of **KREATOR**'s old albums, but I think their records from the 2000s to now are something else. Their sound has only gotten better, starting with *Enemy Of God*. They're one of the greatest thrash metal bands ever. Nervosa were a bit too late for the mid-2000s thrash metal revival, and definitely too late for when thrash was a true sensation in the 80s, but I'm glad we fit in with that lineage. It's a shame places like MTV don't give space to these bands anymore – could you imagine hearing Kreator on there now? It'd be so badass!

"Nervosa are basically a thrash/death metal band, so what better song could we ever have hoped for than *Thrash Till Death* by **DESTRUCTION**? Double meaning! Nervosa have toured with Destruction more than anyone else – we've played with them four times, so they're like family to me. This was always my favourite song by them, too, so it's only gotten more important to me." MH

"A BANK ROBBER STOLE MY MOTORCYCLE!"

NERVOSA ARE ON THE OBITUARY/TESTAMENT THRASH OF THE TITANS UK TOUR THAT STARTS OCTOBER 7 IN BRISTOL

PRESS/GREGORY DOURTOUNIS

Thrash talk: there's a definite theme running through Prika's choices

LIFE LESSONS

MAX CAVALERA

The Brazilian legend has been kicked out of three schools, split his head open onstage, and believes in the afterlife. Here's what he's learned

WORDS: DAVE EVERLEY • PICTURES: ANNIE ATLASMAN

MAX CAVALERA IS living proof that you can transcend your circumstances. He was just a kid from Belo Horizonte when he helped put Brazil on the musical map as the frontman of Sepultura, while his next band, Soulfly, saw him become a cross-cultural lightning rod for likeminded musicians such as Corey Taylor and Chino Moreno, who wanted to step into his world. As he brings Nailbomb, his recently reactivated cult industrial metal side-project, to Europe, he looks back on what he's learned from his epic, if sometimes turbulent, life.

MY MUSIC CAME FROM MY DAD

"He was very musical. He played acoustic guitar, he sang Italian songs, there's a photo of him singing on Brazilian TV. He died when I was young, so I didn't really get to hang out with him enough that he got to see my music career kickstarted. I would have loved to have his advice. But he was a total music freak, which is where me and [Max's younger brother] Iggor got it from."

FUCK THE RULES

"When I was a kid, my mum tried to put us in military school. The first thing you have to do is get a buzzcut. I already had long hair, so that was out the window. There were so many fucking rules there – you had to have short hair, shiny shoes, there were uniforms. It was all about the fucking rules. Fuck that."

EDUCATION AND ME DIDN'T MIX

"Me and Iggor got kicked out of three schools. We were angry, we were living in not-good conditions, we were trouble. There was military school, then there was Catholic school, with nuns and stuff... that didn't work either. Then there was public school, and we got kicked out of that because us and a bunch of friends went into the bathrooms and destroyed all the water fountains. Pure vandalism! That was the last straw. We told our mum we were quitting to do music, and she said, 'It's against what I want, but if you're gonna do music, you have to do it 1,000%. No quitting that in a month. Stick with it.' And that's what we did."

ATTITUDE GOES A LONG WAY

"When we started Sepultura, we weren't that good. I couldn't play my instrument well, but there was a willpower and an attitude. Especially when we got into the heavier stuff. We noticed that the bands were not that technical, and that you didn't have to be a virtuoso to play it. We learned that if you had a little bit of knowledge and a lot of attitude, you could do this stuff."

BELIEF IS EVERYTHING

"Coming from Brazil, the odds are against you. There's a one-in-a-billion chance of making it. But the challenge and the struggle becomes the main focus, and your gasoline. That's your fire. That's what got us where we got to."

THE PAST IS PART OF ME

"I'm proud of the things we achieved in Sepultura, making such amazing records that had such an impact on people from so many different parts of the world and different walks of life. Many people love the catalogue from the Max era, and I'm super-proud of it. I learned a lot from it all. Even the bad times."

NO REGRETS, NO GOING BACK

"One thing I'm proud of with leaving Sepultura is that I stuck to my guns. If I'd stayed with them, it would have been wrong for my integrity. I couldn't sing those songs in that environment. It was killing me, so I had to make a stand and do something drastic. I've never regretted that choice."

"STAYING WITH SEPULTURA WOULD HAVE BEEN WRONG FOR MY INTEGRITY"

NO PAIN NO GAIN

"Soulfly played the Big Day Out in Australia in 1999, and it was the most amazing show. It's where I realised Soulfly was gonna be good. At this same show, some drunk tossed a heavy flashlight onstage. It hit me dead centre in the forehead and split my forehead open. I was singing *Tribe*, I was in the zone, and I felt this pain exploding in my head. There was blood everywhere – I looked like this blood-faced caveman. It was metal as fuck. I remember the guys from Korn standing at the side of the stage, looking scared, but I didn't want to stop. You have to play through the pain."

TOUGH LOVE WORKS

"For a long time, my priorities were getting high and getting wasted. I'm not gonna lie, I enjoyed the shit of it, it was cool, I got to go to the dark side and see how it is. But I was on this path to self-destruction. Gloria [Max's wife and long-time manager] was wise enough to see that – she saved me. She told me what I needed to hear. Most musicians, we want people to agree with everything we say, but she was like, 'This is not gonna end good.' That hit me – my priorities are family and music. Maybe someone like Kurt Cobain didn't have somebody to show him that tough love."

STAY TRUE TO YOUR PATH

"The people who embody rock'n'roll to me are lifers: Rob Halford, Klaus Meine from the Scorpions, AC/DC, Lemmy when he was alive. The people who stayed true to themselves no matter what the ups and downs or how unpopular you get. I see myself as a lifer, for sure. When I get a tattoo on my knuckles or my neck, that's my way of saying I'm never going back to normal society. I can't go back there."

SUCCESS ISN'T EVERYTHING

"For me, it's not about money or the charts or gold records. The material world doesn't have the same effect on me as it does with some other people. I'm not interested in getting the biggest house in Bel Air or wherever. Creative things make me happy. Doing what you love with the people you love."

FAMILY MATTERS

"Family is important because they're people you can trust. We've a big family - kids, stepkids, everything. It was really cool when my sons got involved in music with me – I have Zyon in Soulfly and Igor does all the Cavalera

PRESS/ANNIE ATLASMAN

Max Cavalera: of course he didn't wanna cut his hair for military school

Max hopes to still be fucking shit up when he's 80

"WE'RE THE OSMONDS OF METAL"

stuff and Go Ahead And Die. But this was all organic, it wasn't created in some studio where some guy said, 'Let's make The Osmonds of metal.' I mean, I think we maybe are The Osmonds of metal, but that was purely by some crazy accident. None of it was planned."

FAMILIES ARGUE. SO WHAT?

"Arguments exist. Being in a band with my sons, there's times that they drive me nuts. They want to play songs that I want to play, but sometimes I have to bribe them to play them! But I wouldn't trade it for anything."

FOLLOW YOUR HEART, AND LET OTHER PEOPLE DO THE SAME

"I did what I wanted to, and everybody should be free to do that. What would I say if one of my kids said, 'I don't wanna do music, I wanna work in a bank!'? 'Do what makes you happy.'"

NIHILISM NEVER GOES OUT OF FASHION

"[1994 Nailbomb album] *Point Blank* is a nihilistic record. It's more relevant now than when we made it. It fits the times we're living in like a glove. There's a lot of uncertainty in the world right now, especially here in the States. We like to think we're civilised and that our leaders know what they're doing, but sometimes I don't think that's the case. The guys that are in charge, most of them are morons. It's fucking scary, but there's a cool magic in the Nailbomb attitude of giving zero fucks. It's got a true, primal anger."

METAL EQUALS THERAPY

"I've been screaming at the world for 40 years, and that's the best therapy you can have. Otherwise I'd probably be out killing people or doing dumb shit. Metal is a positive force."

AGE IS JUST A NUMBER

"The 15-year-old Max would think it's crazy I'm still doing this. I hope I'm still doing it when I'm 70 or 80. The worst thing that can happen to a person is not having a purpose. When that happens, life sucks. That's why I'll keep making music, creating, jamming with my family, jamming with my friends. I did it when I was 15, I'm doing it now. It's all I want to do."

DON'T FEAR DEATH

"I'm a spiritual guy. I like to think that you go somewhere special when you die, that it's not over. There's not a blackness or a nothingness, I don't think that. And I really like the concept of reincarnation, coming back and starting a new life with other people. I'd like either. Anything except for total blackness. That's boring. I need some more exciting shit."

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THE STORY BEHIND

PROGENIES OF THE GREAT APOCALYPSE

DIMMU BORGIR

The song that brought black metal howling out of the underground via symphonic orchestras and Hollywood

WORDS: PERRAN HELYES

IN 2004, DIMMU Borgir guitarist Silenoz sat in a Texas cinema. As the lights dimmed and the movie previews started to show, one of them hit a little different. Accompanying the trailer for director Guillermo del Toro's new *Hellboy* film came the unmistakable orchestral blasts of *Progenies Of The Great Apocalypse*, from Dimmu's extravagant new album, *Death Cult Armageddon*, released in September the previous year. Just a decade before, the members of Dimmu Borgir were teenagers being indoctrinated into the radical new sounds of Norwegian black metal through obscure records purchased at the Helvete record store in Oslo, run by Mayhem mastermind Euronymous. Now, through them, black metal had broken Hollywood.

"It was a culture shift," Silenoz reflects today. "Sat there, surrounded by people who have no clue who you are, hearing your music in a cinema... I was chuckling to myself. We weren't thinking that *Hellboy* was going to be a huge Hollywood production on the scale of *Lord Of The Rings* or anything, but it obviously got noticed."

Dimmu certainly had few problems with that. Although the black metal scene always had a flair for the dramatic – particularly the headline-grabbing Norwegian scene – Dimmu had moved themselves beyond their peers with grandiose orchestration and top-of-the-line production values that were far removed from the music's rough-and-ready roots. It's little wonder Hollywood wanted a taste.

"Our mindset was that we'd want to be the first to do something rather than follow others," he reasons. "Part of that is doing stuff without a parachute. When you step into uncertain waters, there is a chance you can hit or miss, but for the most part we had more hits than misses."

Such is the attitude a band must have if they are to brave the potential fallout of an underground movement being dragged kicking and screaming into such visible mainstream terrain. Alongside the likes of Cradle Of Filth, who would pick up a Grammy nomination for the similarly glossy *Nymphetamine* the following year but had long been an object of ire for black metal purists, Dimmu found themselves as public representatives for a scene that frequently resented commercial publicity.

THE FACTS

RELEASED: 2003

ALBUM: *Death Cult Armageddon*

PERSONNEL: Shagrath (vocals), Silenoz (guitars), Galder (guitars), ICS Vortex (bass, vocals), Nick Barker (drums), Mustis (keys), Abbath (vocals), Prague Philharmonic Orchestra, Gaute Storaas (orchestration/arrangements)

The band had been pushing boundaries since the late 90s, when they'd embraced the immensely characterful – but budgetarily achievable – sounds of cheap synths and keyboards to create a symphonic sound, inspired in part by Emperor's landmark album, *In The Nightside Eclipse*. Becoming kings of that style on the likes of 1997's *Enthrone Darkness Triumphant*, by the turn of the millennium Dimmu were ready to go bigger than anyone before and enlisted the Prague Philharmonic Orchestra to realise their bombastic dreams.

"On [2001 album] *Puritanical Euphoric Misanthropia* we had started to use a smaller chamber orchestra," Silenoz recalls. "[Norwegian jazz and classical musician] Gaute Storaas has been helping us through the years arranging the keyboard and orchestral parts, and he suggested that if we wanted to go more full-on for *Death Cult Armageddon* we use the Prague Philharmonic."

Recorded at Fredrik Nordström's Studio Fredman in Gothenburg, Sweden, the sonic fidelity of the huge

SHUTTERSTOCK

Dimmu Borgir (left to right): ICS Vortex, Silenoz, Shagrath, Mustis, Galder

orchestra was a seismic leap – so much so, they sounded decades ahead of their flimsier symphonic black metal peers. But Dimmu weren't alone in their symphonic intent. The early 2000s saw a tremendous boom in the scale and popularity of symphonic metal from the likes of Nightwish and Within Temptation, with Dimmu the first band to match that blockbuster ambition from within the extreme metal scene. *Progenies Of The Great Apocalypse* put this new-found classical girth right at the forefront, with what Silenoz describes as "a mish-mash of Wagner, Prokofiev, and Beethoven". To bring it back to *Hellboy* terms, it's genuinely cinematic.

The opening line of *Progenies...* ('*The battle raged on and on*') is also among the most instantly recognisable in black metal legend, though it's not Dimmu Borgir frontman Shagrath who utters it. Instead, the band called in crab-walker extraordinaire Abbath, then of fellow Norwegian icons Immortal, to do the honours. There might have been some difference of opinion around Dimmu's courting of Hollywoodand just how expensive they hadmade black metal sound, but the presence of Abbath gave thema subversive edge – they were bringing one of their original black metal comrades along with them into this unchartered territory.

"It wasn't difficult to get him," Silenoz shrugs. "It was just cool to have one of those legends involved in your art. He does another vocal cameo on *Heavenly Perverse* on the album, and we've been talking about how if we ever do any shows together at some point, he can come on and do his part.

"THE 'APOCALYPSE' DOESN'T HAVE TO BE THE WORLD GOING DOWN IN FLAMES"

SILENOZ

It's just a shame that he wasn't able to be a part of the video for some reason."

Early black metal videes were delightfully kitsch - if Abbath had appeared in the *Progenies* video, it's unlikely the wizard's hat that featured in Immortal's infamous *Call Of The Wintermoon* clip from 1992 would have come with him. But in 1996, Satyricon released their pioneering *Mother North* video, and other black metal bands started to get the budget to produce them. *Progenies* represented the apex, as Dimmu projected an image fit for and commanding of the massive rock video market of the early 2000s.

Directed by Patric Ullaeus between shoots for Within Temptation and Lacuna Coil, it saw the band perform inside an enormous steam-powered turbine, showcasing the futuristic and industrial imagery that Dimmu Borgir adopted around *Death Cult Armageddon*, shaking off their previous medieval and archaic aesthetic fixations. For Silenoz, this imagery was part of the album's rebellion against the shackles of the old world.

"A lot of the lyrics on *Death Cult Armageddon* share the same themes

Dimmu: obey? Not bloody likely!

of disobedience to this earthly realm, organised modern religion, cults, sects," he elaborates. "All of these things take away from humanity's identity and prosperity. They steal the energy and the livelihoods, so to speak, from each person, and we want to come to terms with that in order to move on. You have to break away from those boundaries."

Viewed in this light, *Progenies Of The Great Apocalypse* is an unexpectedly optimistic song, that raging battle announced by Abbath not necessarily an end of days but a rebirth.

"The 'apocalypse' does not have to be the world going down in flames, it can be something of an unveiling," Silenoz considers. "The lyrical theme on that song, and I guess overall on that album, is dealing with trying to find yourself in darkness, coming to terms with it, and then starting anew. When I wrote the lyrics, I tried to look back to our mental space in the early 90s, when we were still teenagers but felt invincible. It touches upon certain magic and old rites, but overall it's more like a statement."

The gargantuan hook delivered by then-bassist ICS Vortex - *'We, who not deny the animal of our nature; we, who yearn to preserve our liberation'* – reads like a manifesto on the very identity of black metal, casting aside society's follies. Vortex, who reunited onstage with the band for the first time last year at Oslo's Inferno Festival, following their acrimonious split in 2009, is an almost cartoonishly colossal presence on the track, emphasised by the band's restraint, as they only deploy his vocals on a few key spots on the album.

"I think it's very safe to say that to utilise his vocal talents was a case of less is more," Silenoz says. "When we did something with them, it would be something that would stick out and be memorable. That's how we wrote songs back in the day when he was in the band. He had his other bands at the same time, so we didn't want to overdo it and water it down."

Ramming forth like a fist of black metal ideology through the curtain of the mainstream, *Progenies Of The Great Apocalypse* became one of the great standard-bearing anthems – in the true sense of the word – for extreme music. Within three years of its release, *Death Cult Armageddon* became the first album on Nuclear Blast Records to sell more than 100,000 copies in the USA – a massive number for a band who'd gotten their start in the shadow of Norwegian black metal's controversial founding fathers. In the present day, with Lorna Shore's pomp and brutality being one of our most unlikely success stories, it's easy to look back at *Progenies...* as a paradigm shift for the symphonically extreme.

"To get that far on our own terms was something we took pride in," Silenoz nods. "We had nothing to compare with because we were the first ones basically doing it. That's the mindset we have to this day and that's probably why we're still around."

"WE TOOK PRIDE IN GETTING THAT FAR ON OUR OWN TERMS"

SILENOZ

DIMMU BORGIR PLAY WACKEN IN AUGUST

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PRESIDENT

They're masked, they're anonymous, and they might be metal's next big thing

WORDS: RICH HOBSON

A SHADOWY BAND using masks to conceal their identities. Religious iconography. A simple, tantalising statement: "No names. No past. No distractions. Only the mission ahead." Anybody else getting Déjà vu?

In February, a mysterious new band got the metal world talking. They had no music, no online presence and only a single teaser video that raised more questions than it answered. But somehow, President had just been announced for the UK's biggest and rock and metal festival. Naturally, online sleuths went wild. The fact they shared a bill – and management –with the equally enigmatic Sleep Token helped fan the flames of interest, and the release of singles *In The Name Of The Father* and *Fearless* months later only poured on the gasoline.

By the time President held their self-proclaimed 'inaugural rally' on Sunday June 15, the buzz had become a frenzy. Not only was the Dogtooth Stage tent rammed, but a curious crowd was packed around its perimeter, 15-20 people deep at some points.

"That's the most nervous I've ever been in my life," the mastermind behind President – eponymously known as 'President' – admits. "It was trial by fire – but I've noticed if you do something that's really uncomfortable and hard, and it goes well, the gratification you get from it is so much higher."

Discomfort has been a key driving force behind President (the band) since the beginning. Raised in a religious household, President (the man) left faith behind as he grew older, triggering an existential crisis. The mask he wears isn't a marketing ploy, it's a physical barrier that helps him work through his issues and difficult subjects.

"When you're institutionalised into something and you eventually get out of it, you end up wondering, 'How much of this is what I think, and how much is what I was *told* to think?'" he explains. "President is the perfect way for me to explore these feelings and not have it feel like 'me' who has the spotlight on them."

With their masked, mysterious nature, comparisons between President and Sleep Token were inevitable – and that was before they'd released a note of music. With *In The Name Of The Father* and *Fearless*, the band unveiled a sound that felt decidedly indebted to Vessel and co., adopting a similarly disdainful approach to genre boundaries, as they mix elements of tech metal, pop and electronica. But where Sleep Token have the deity Sleep, President are much less esoteric about their religious iconography. And while it would be easy to think of President as being a negative reaction to their frontman's own religious upbringing, he's quick to clarify that's not the case.

"None of this is anti-religion," he refutes. "It's baring the soul of the search for higher meaning. I was in a very dark place five years ago. I couldn't write about it [in other projects] because I felt too vulnerable with it all; this project has allowed me to come out of that. It's a massive journey of discovery."

That journey began in earnest around Christmas 2023. Long before the idea of masks or hidden identities had arisen, the vocalist was writing lyrics for what would end up being debut single *In The Name Of The Father*, pouring all his anxieties and struggles with religion and God into the song. Fast forward 18 months, and a massive crowd were singing those same words back at him.

"They were singing *In The Name Of The Father* like they'd known it for 20 years," he marvels. "I started crying when I came offstage. It fucking broke me! I'd written that song before I'd really figured out how this was all going to fit together and play out. It was a note to myself, where I was and what I was going through."

After *Father...*, President spent the next eight months working on the rest of the songs that make up the band's debut EP, *King Of Terrors*. Keeping with the religious themes, the title is a biblical metaphor for death.

"It's the ultimate marker – if there's nothing after death then that changes everything about life, and the same is true if there *is* something," he explains. "My uncle passed away a few years ago, and that was the first time I'd had someone die who was close to me when I wasn't part of this religious thinking. It hit me really hard. So *King Of Terrors* sums up the journey I've been on."

> "WE'RE NEVER GOING TO DISCUSS OUR IDENTITIES"
> PRESIDENT

Although it started out as a solo project, President has since evolved into a fully fleshed band with drummer Vice, bassist Protest and guitarist Heist helping realise "a collaborative vision", as the singer puts it. Speculation about the identities of its members was unavoidable, but their frontman doesn't mind. Discussing some of the more outlandish theories, he grins and waves the idea away.

"We're never going to discuss or acknowledge our identities," he shrugs.

As for the future, it's anyone's guess. The band's first headline gig sold out in minutes, and early next year they'll open for Architects on a massive arena run around Europe. The singer hums thoughtfully, considering the future, and decides on what he wants.

"President is therapeutic, in a way," he muses. "It's turned into this safe space to explore things I didn't think I could before. So I'm going to write a full-length pretty much immediately." H

THE *KING OF TERRORS* EP IS DUE LATER THIS YEAR. PRESIDENT WILL PLAY THE GARAGE IN LONDON ON JULY 30

IN SHORT

SOUNDS LIKE:
The future in all its clanging, tech-riffing, pop hook-slinging glory

FOR FANS OF:
Sleep Token, Architects, Bring Me The Horizon

LISTEN TO:
In The Name Of The Father

PRESS

President: do they get your vote?

GATES TO HELL

Kentucky-fried death metal with a hardcore stomp

WORDS: DAN McHUGH

GATES TO HELL made quite the impact with their self-titled debut in 2022. Their frenetic mix of old-school death metal and stomping hardcore proved to be a potent combination that elevated them from playing the small club circuit in their native Kentucky to recently supporting Kublai Khan on sold-out European and UK runs.

"We've been used to playing DIY shows in front of about 50 people, so to go from that to venues with over 1,000 capacity was an insane step up," explains guitarist and main songwriter Seth Lewis. "We were also the only death metal band on the line-up, so to see crowds going nuts and enjoying our music was amazing."

Their recent additions – guitarist Eli Hanson and drummer Trey Garris (brother of Knocked Loose frontman Bryan) – solidified Gates To Hell's ranks, and they've recorded a new album, *Death Comes To All*: 20 minutes of unrelenting brutality designed to propel them into the spotlight.

"This was the first time we sat down as a band and had a drummer write and flesh out their own parts, which we think made a big difference," admits Seth. "Being able to work with Randy LeBoeuf at Graphic Nature Audio also helped us feel a lot more locked in."

Inspired by myriad sources such as Waking The Cadaver, Enemy Mind and Machine Head, Gates To Hell wear their influences on their collective sleeves.

"We would always meet up and go to shows, so the hardcore scene became very familiar to us," says Seth. "Eli brought a lot of ideas to the table for the new album too, so meshing our styles together assisted in the progression of our sound. We want people to hear us and think, 'Shit, this band goes hard!'" MH

***DEATH COMES TO ALL* IS OUT NOW VIA NUCLEAR BLAST. GATES TO HELL WILL PLAY LOUDER THAN LIFE FESTIVAL IN SEPTEMBER**

IN SHORT

SOUNDS LIKE:
An explosive blend of death metal and hardcore summoned straight from the Underworld

FOR FANS OF:
Gatecreeper, Frozen Soul, Vomit Forth

LISTEN TO:
Next To Bleed

PRESS

PRESS/MCBEE MEDIA

THE DEFECT

Shimmering synths and clanging industrial in one alluring package

WORDS: JACK TERRY • PICTURE: McBEE MEDIA

JUST 18 MONTHS AGO, Moon McBee was a chef. Now, alongside her husband Jonny and drummer Brandon Funera (both members of electronicore outfit The Browning), she's released an album with her industrial metal band, The Defect, and toured the US. Formed last year as Death X Destiny – a name that's been given to their debut album – The Defect were born of Jonny's desire to separate The Browning's heavier tracks from the more melodic, synth-led music the band had dabbled in. As a debutant vocalist, Moon not only had to learn how to sing, but also how to become a professional musician.

"Other than singing in the car, I haven't done shit," Moon admits with a laugh. "I feel like true musicians hear music in layers and they hear different aspects of the music, whereas the average consumer – which is what I came into this as – hears it as a whole, so I've been having to learn how to hear different parts. It's been kind of a lot."

On the trio's debut album, *Death X Destiny*, shimmering synths dance and intermingle with Moon's alluring vocals, only to give way to pounding riffs, guttural howls from Jonny and artillery-like drums. It's an album of wild extremes, undulating restlessly across 10 tracks. Songs like *Broken Minds* and *A Way Out* are the yin to the yang of *Immortal* and *Dreamwalker*, highlighting The Defect's ability to balance ethereal lightness with crushing darkness respectively. But although the record was put together over the past year, The Defect aren't taking it easier now they're established.

"I don't know how many beans I can spill yet, but big things are coming," Moon teases. "Tours and festivals, some out of US stuff... People will be happy."

IN SHORT

SOUNDS LIKE:
Androids dreaming of electric sheep – with added neon

FOR FANS OF:
The Browning, Nine Inch Nails, I See Stars

LISTEN TO:
Dreamwalker

***DEATH X DESTINY* IS OUT NOW VIA FIXT**

KING KRAKEN

Welsh riff lords shaking their rehearsal room to its foundations

WORDS: TIM BOLITHO-JONES • PICTURE: PAUL HUTCHINGS

"WE USED TO rehearse in a music shop, but we got kicked out for being too loud," laughs King Kraken singer Mark Donoghue. "I think that's a promising sign."

King Kraken are not a timid bunch. They're a window-shaking, chest-thumping, riff-heavy metal band and, for Mark, they're an opportunity to forge a new career. He's got decades of singing experience, but aside from a brief stint in an obscure rap metal group called Blackfly, he's mainly performed in cover bands. With King Kraken, he can play his own songs and, this time, there's not a turntable scratch or oversized pair of jeans in sight.

The new King Kraken album, *March Of The Gods*, showcases this beautifully. It's a collection of anthems steeped in heavy metal tradition but beefed up with modern production. King Kraken have roots in stoner metal but possess a vitality that their more bleary-eyed contemporaries lack. There are bowel-loosening basslines, chunky power chords, and enough swagger to make this an essential gym soundtrack for classic metal devotees.

There's a surprising amount of variation in the lyrics, too. *Berserker* is a good old Vikings-on-a-rampage rabble-rouser, but at the other end of the spectrum there's *Hero*, a tear-jerking tribute to Mark's father. King Kraken have an emotional depth that stems from the knowledge that life won't last forever.

IN SHORT

SOUNDS LIKE:
Axe-swinging, riff-heavy, big chorus thunder metal

FOR FANS OF:
Clutch, Grand Magus, Metallica

LISTEN TO:
Berserker

"The older you get, you go to less christenings and more funerals," Mark admits. But this fatalistic outlook has a positive side. Recognising that time was passing, he realised he wanted to throw his energy into King Kraken and, finally, at the tender age of 52, it's all coming together.

"If you told 20-year-old-me, 'You're going to play Stone Dead, you're going to play Bloodstock...' I would have said, 'You're joking!' This is a dream, and it's absolutely insane." H

***MARCH OF THE GODS* IS OUT NOW. KING KRAKEN SUPPORT PHIL CAMPBELL AND THE BASTARD SONS IN PONTYPRIDD AND NARBERTH IN OCTOBER**

PRESS/PAUL HUTCHINGS

PRESS/ASHLEA BEA

SPLIT CHAIN

The Bristolian quintet putting a modern, hazy spin on 2000s nostalgia

WORDS: WILL MARSHALL • PICTURE: ASHLEA BEA

BRISTOLIAN 'NU GAZE' quintet Split Chain formed in 2023, when bassist Tom Davies was getting sober and found that he had far more free time on his hands than he was comfortable with.

"Bert [Martinez-Cowles, vocalist] being the mate that he is, decided he was going to help me through it," Tom remembers. "Bert and I were just watching skate videos, listening to music, and we decided to write a Superheaven song for fun. We wrote the two demos for *Get Inside* and *Future* and thought, 'Fuck, this is actually really good!'"

Lyrically, their songs are deeply personal.

"*I'm Not Dying To Be Here* is about dealing with family, and being at such a toxic and horrible point," Bert says. "The point of the song is that I'm not going to put myself through so much to stay in this family... Do what you need to do to not be in bad places."

IN SHORT

SOUNDS LIKE:
Booting up the PlayStation and being sucked into *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater*

FOR FANS OF:
Superheaven, Deftones, Loathe

LISTEN TO:
I'm Not Dying To Be Here

With its hazy bounce, *I'm Not Dying...* would be right at home on the *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater* soundtrack, while *Future* injects more nu metal into washes of guitar. With their shimmering guitars and laconic vocals, Split Chain's most obvious influence is undeniably Deftones, but there's a distinct grunge influence underpinning their music, and a cover of Type O Negative's *I Don't Wanna Be Me* shows a love for wider cultural touchpoints of the 90s. Following their initial clutch of singles, they've inked a deal with Epitaph Records for their debut album *Motionblur*, a record they describe as a "coming of age story".

Starting as a way to help a friend stay sober, Split Chain have grown into a passion project and homage to the end-of-the-century music and culture they love.

***MOTIONBLUR* IS OUT NOW VIA EPITAPH**

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tinyurl.com/load-boxset

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tinyurl.com/potion-bag

FALLUJAH T-SHIRT
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Progressive death metal can be a bit long in the tooth, but Fallujah's sixth full-length album, *Xenotaph*, clocks in at a bladder-sympathetic 42 minutes. Give it a proper listen, have a wee, then pull on the t-shirt while you consider listening again.

tinyurl.com/xeno-tee

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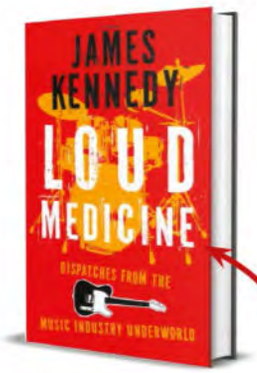

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tinyurl.com/loud-medicine

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This set features 35 tracks splashed across four blood-red slabs of wax. The soundtrack is tense, dense and evocative, mixing medieval themes with booming synths. Perfect for drowning out the sound of the world burning.

tinyurl.com/doom-boxset

BLACKBRAID LONGSLEEVE
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Praying for a swift end to the sticky British summer? First Nation black metallers Blackbraid are here to manifest your desires with an imminent third album and this frostbitten, lupine longsleeve.

tinyurl.com/wolf-kvlt

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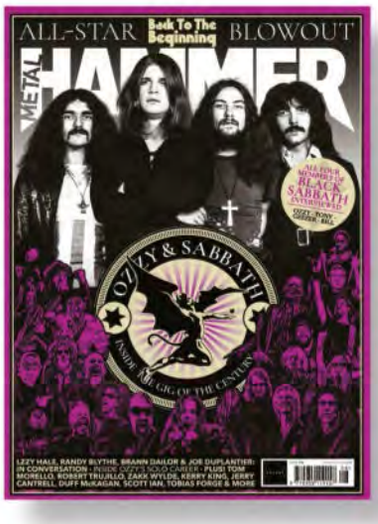

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JOHN McMURTRIE

QUEEN OF EVERYTHING

Iron Maiden tours. Black Sabbath shows. Judas Priest documentaries. Times Square billboards. Lzzy Hale is everyone's favourite go-to rock star. But it's taken a rock-bottom moment and some existential soul-searching to get here

WORDS: MERLIN ALDERSLADE • PICTURES: JOHN McMURTRIE

Lzzy Hale: no longer surrendering to the booze

JOHN McMURTRIE

Lzzy Hale nearly bangs her head off as she wails on her guitar, throwing herself to her knees and letting that unbelievable voice rip during crushing new Halestorm track *Rain Your Blood On Me*. She's up quickly, striding around the stage like a war general, as 12,500 stunned Iron Maiden fans look on.

We're in Budapest, for the first date of Maiden's Run For Your Lives tour. Their fanbase is notoriously difficult to please – we once saw a member of Funeral For A Friend take a full pint to the face at a Maiden show in London - but Lzzy isn't faced by crossed arms, grumpy faces or loaded projectiles. There are dropped jaws, wide grins and even a few fists pumping. It seems Lzzy and her bandmates came ready for a challenge.

"It's my favourite thing, actually," she beams, as we sit down to chat the following day. "It reminded me of when we opened up for Megadeth back in 2010 – notorious fans! They don't care who the opener is, and even back then, it was kind of a game for me. We were talking to the Iron Maiden crew last night, and they said, 'We can't believe it. There were no middle fingers, no coins being thrown, shoes being thrown, anything like that.'"

Given Halestorm are almost three decades in and legitimate arena headliners themselves at this point, is it not even a *little bit* annoying to still have to go out in front of stubborn rock fans and win them over?

"I really do love that!" she says. "At this stage in the game, we've been a band for almost 28 years. It's very exciting to be opening up for a band where the majority of fans most likely have no idea who we are. That challenge to win them over is what we live for."

And that right there is Lzzy Hale in a nutshell. Zero bullshit. No presumptions. A proper rock star without the ego. The heavy metal fanatic who started a band with her brother, drummer Arejay, at 13 years old, worked her ass off, made it big and doesn't take a single second of it for granted.

She walks into our interview looking every inch the 'rock star' part of that sentiment – black leather trench coat, heels, fingers adorned with rings – though it's a mint tea she pops on the table rather than a Jack and Coke. More on that later.

We're sitting on two stools in a large, open room backstage in the Papp László Sportaréna in Budapest. It's the same venue where Halestorm blew away 12,500 impatient Iron Maiden fans last night; we're surrounded by members of the metal legends' entourage busily turning the place into a VIP area for this evening. Supporting Iron Maiden was another milestone moment for Lzzy, who seems to be racking them up. Hell, at this point it feels like she's ticking off side quests: over the past 12 months alone, on top of her Halestorm duties, she's fronted Skid Row for a whole tour, chaired a Spotify Women Of Metal summit that got her face plastered over a Times Square billboard, contributed to an upcoming Judas Priest documentary, and earned the slightly strange honour of being the only woman invited to play Black Sabbath's massive final show. Is she officially metal's go-to personality right now?

"It's truly incredible," she says. There's a pause, before she adds thoughtfully: "I think that the lesson to be learned is that you can't spill yourself for someone else until you fill your own cup up first."

Lzzy faces down the Maiden fans in Budapest

"MAIDEN'S CREW SAID, 'WE CAN'T BELIEVE IT – NO SHOES BEING THROWN!'"

If that sounds like therapy language, it may well be: Lzzy has been having sessions since 2019, taking productive measures to process the mental health issues she has encountered for most of her life. Over the years, she's publicly discussed her complex relationship with organised religion (grew up around it, distanced herself from it by the age of 14), her sexuality (she came out as bisexual on Twitter in 2014), her imposter syndrome (yup, rock stars get it too!) and her bouts of depression. It helped her forge a deep connection with Halestorm's fans, though that inevitably invited its own pressures. Now, she's at a place where she feels comfortable being both a role model to her followers and a peer to many of her heroes – even if it's taken plenty of work to get here.

"What I had to do in order to be comfortable in this role again," she says, "is break everything down and more or less systematically rid myself of the things that no longer make me happy."

Things like alcohol. Lzzy is 18 months sober at the time of our conversation, having decided to quit the booze for good in December 2023. Years of life on the road and indulging a few of those good ol' rock star clichés had left her with a drinking problem that had escalated and led to some troubling behaviour. Appearing on the *Harder To Breathe* podcast in April, Lzzy revealed that not long after she and partner/Halestorm guitarist Joe Hottinger had arrived back home in Nashville after the band headlined London's Wembley Arena, she was found by Joe, totally shitfaced, crying and babbling incoherently in their bedroom. She had 'rescued' a dusty old bottle of Jägermeister that she'd found in their basement, washing it down with a four-pack of Angostura bitters.

"I was looking for an escape in all the wrong places," she tells us now. "I saw myself in a way that I never wanted to be. I almost saw my nemesis in myself, a woman I did not want to become. I think that if I had gone any further... I don't know what would have happened with my relationship with my bandmates, my relationship with myself. That was the peak of it all."

Just down the corridor, we can hear Iron Maiden soundchecking for tonight's second gig in this building. It's named after László Papp, the undefeated Hungarian boxer who made history by winning three successive Olympic gold medals during the 40s and 50s. Clearly, Lzzy ▶

Halestorm (left to right): Joe Hottinger, Lzzy Hale, Josh Smith, Arejay Hale

JOHN McMURTRIE

is a fighter herself – she certainly knows a thing or two about getting back up after being knocked down. The day after that incident at her house, she decided to jack the booze in completely, and began the process of working through the latest bout of depression she had been covering up.

"I felt so guilty about it," she says. "I mean, I'm living this unfathomable dream that I would have never even thought would have been possible when we first started the band. It was this battle in my head: 'Why are you so depressed? Why are you frustrated? Why are you angry? This life is great! You could be working in an office somewhere!'"

Lzzy is talking about her own inner voice, but she could just as easily be referencing that ever-permeating preconception of rock star life, that it's all fun and games, glamour and debauchery, and any musician found moaning about it must be ungrateful.

"What people don't normally understand, when they're looking from the outside, is that as much as this looks like a lot of fun, it's a lot of hard work, and you have to put a lot of yourself into it," she adds. "And if you're not ready for certain challenges, you have to figure it out on your own, and there aren't a whole lot of people to help you."

If most people were either blissfully unaware or turning a blind eye to Lzzy's situation during that 2023 tour, one group had noticed something was up and weren't willing to let it slide: her fans.

"We were out in Europe, and there were eight young girls that were coming to about 10 shows in a row," Lzzy explains. "They were buying into every meet and greet, and so we would see them every day. And after about the third show, they were lined up in the meet and greet, and they asked me if I was doing alright. And I said, 'Oh yeah, I'm fine. I'm just tired, you know?' They said, 'We've seen you hundreds of times, and there's a light behind your eyes that isn't there right now.'

"The next day, they came to the meet and greet, and they each had a note for me. Each one of them, in their own way, had said in their note, 'Hey, we don't know what's going on with you, but if you have to quit the tour, if you have to take a break for a while, if you have to figure yourself out, we're going to be here for you.'"

"I SAW A WOMAN I DID NOT WANT TO BECOME"

It was an emotional breakthrough for Lzzy that deepened the connection between her and her fans even more. The following show, she invited the girls onto her bus, opening up about the depression she had suffered over the years and the manner in which it had reared its head again. But at that point, she still didn't quite feel ready to take the necessary steps forward.

"For a while, I wasn't sure if anything was wrong or if it was just me," she explains. "I also was very afraid to ask for help, because I felt like if I was asking for help, that means that I had failed in my own internal compass and in policing myself. So in a way, I kind of had to get to that point in order to admit, 'OK, I have to figure something out.'"

Luckily, when that breaking point hit in December 2023 and it was time for a reset, Lzzy did figure something out: she actually didn't have to fight this battle alone. Her three bandmates – Joe, Arejay and bassist Josh Smith – were there for her immediately, and they let her know it.

"It wasn't necessarily an intervention, but they were all like, 'What is going *on* with you?'" she says. "When I was describing what was going on – and they've seen me in every iteration of my life, we've known each other for 22

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years – they all said to me, 'You do not have to carry this weight all by yourself. We can help you. We're in this together. We're still here, and we're still brothers to you.' And what I realised in that moment is that those men know me more than my own family."

And so, bolstered by the support of her bandmates, Lzzy got stuck into processing her emotions via the same method she's used since she was a young teenager: she wrote. And she wrote and wrote and wrote some more. By the time Halestorm went to Savannah, Georgia, to record a new album with heavyweight producer Dave Cobb, she was armed to the teeth with lyrics ready to drop and song ideas ready to roll, her experiences channelled into another set of ready-made, arena-proof Halestorm bangers. Except... not a single one of her ideas actually made it past the front door.

"I have a pile full of songs, and Joe's got riffs for days," she laughs. "And Dave sits us down. He's like, 'Oh, no, we're not doing any of that. I want to start every day with a fresh idea, and while we are writing it, we're going to hit record, and we're going to record in real time.'"

"I REALISED MY BANDMATES KNOW ME MORE THAN MY OWN FAMILY"

It was a shock to the system. Just write all new songs from scratch? *On the fly?* It didn't so much push Halestorm out of their comfort zone as blindfold them, spin them around 50 times, and move them to a new postcode.

"We were in this house in Savannah," Lzzy says. "There were no wives, no girlfriends, no kids, no family. We were left unsupervised! The last time that we were ever like that was when we were about 19 years old, you know, without a crew, no managers, no nothing. I don't know what happened, but in our minds, we went back to the beginning."

If Lzzy was coming out of an existential crisis of her own, the band were about to have one too. Stripped of a battle plan and forced to tap into the energy that drove them all to make music in the first place, Halestorm found themselves attempting to, as Lzzy puts it, "rediscover the Big Why".

"Why do you do what you do?" she explains "Why do we still like each other? Why do we still do this? Why are we still fighting for this? All of those subjects were starting to come out of the woodwork, and so what we ended up discovering is that the entire world could burn, we could be the only people left on Earth, and we would still absolutely love each other and love what we do. We don't need anyone else's opinions, anyone's guidance. We created this record fully trusting each other and trusting our gut."

That record is called *Everest*: about as on-the-nose an allegory as you could hope for, and a title that represents not just Lzzy's hard climb out of a dark place, but the band's own challenging journey to reckoning with their place in the world after all these years together. If you're assuming that means a big, happy, triumphant 'Fuck yeah!' of an album, you'd best think again. *Everest* is comfortably the darkest, most challenging and most surprising thing Halestorm have ever put their name to.

"I realised that not everything has a shiny, white light at the end," Lzzy says, when we put this to her. "This album is not necessarily an album of despair or an album of hope. It is reality."

Everest is peak Halestorm

JOHN McMURTRIE

Halestorm open the opening night of Maiden's Run For Your Lives tour

"THIS IS A NEW ME. A NEW PERSPECTIVE"

If *Everest* is Halestorm's new reality, it certainly isn't a dull one. It's an extremely diverse record, channelling everything from the imperious stomp of 90s Metallica (*Fallen Star*), to swaggering glam metal (*Rain Your Blood On Me, Watch Out!*), to waltzy blues (*Like A Woman Can*), to a genuinely head-turning bit of System Of A Down worship (*K-I-L-L-I-N-G*). Lzzy's lyrics are as emotionally raw as ever. One moment she's wrapping up righteous female rage in wardrum-banging poetry (*'Break the chain around my neck, scream my name in shades of red!'*), the next she's going fully existential as she ponders her own legacy (*'Will I leave behind the best of me?'*). The common thread is that she has reaffirmed her willingness to pull no punches and tell her truth – something she says was consolidated by the conversation with those young girls on her bus.

"I must credit our fans for giving me that gift," she says warmly. "Giving me permission to be myself, you know? The good and the bad and the ugly."

Lzzy is entering a brand new era

You sense that this is a particularly important new chapter for Lzzy. Barely into her 40s, sober, and about to unleash what may just be her defining work, her determination to get back out there and blow more people away is tangible.

"I think it's the *ending* of an era, but it's also the beginning of a brand new one," Lzzy nods. "I can feel it with my guys too. Everyone in Halestorm is so excited about what we're doing. This album is laying the ground for whatever is going to happen. And we don't really know what that is yet, but we're looking at ourselves with new eyes."

It's all given her an excuse for a public refresh, of sorts. This year, she launched a new personal Instagram account, abandoning her old one of almost 650,000 followers and encouraging people to follow the "new" her. It was a surprising move for a successful, high-profile artist – one that she reveals "disappointed" a few people working with the band that couldn't see the bigger picture, or what that refresh symbolises for her.

"It's a strange thing to do!" she admits. "It was a move on my part to clean the slate and say, 'OK, well, the past is the past.' This is a new me, a new perspective. And in the wake of the album, I wanted to see how many people would follow me over and be OK if it wasn't everybody. I liked the challenge to the public, but it was a challenge for myself too."

And with that, as Lzzy bids us farewell with a friendly hug and strides off to prepare for another night of winning over stubborn metalheads, it appears we've come full circle. Another day, another challenge to conquer for one of modern heavy metal's prize fighters. This might be a bold new chapter, but in many ways, this is also the same Lzzy Hale as always. Except this time, it might just be Lzzy at her very best. Everest must be bricking it.

***EVEREST* IS OUT AUGUST 8 VIA ATLANTIC RECORDS. HALESTORM TOUR THE UK IN NOVEMBER**

JOHN McMURTRIE

Joe Hottinger gives us summit to think about with the *Everest* track-by-track

CLIMBING EVEREST

Halestorm guitarist Joe Hottinger gives us a track-by-track guide to the band's new album

FALLEN STAR
"Remember [2000s Canadian metallers] Priestess? Their first album starts with a riff that just goes on [*I Am The Night, Colour Me Black*]. I always thought that was brilliant – so I wrote this music with that in mind! I just want the riff to feel like it's *too* long, you know? Just keep rocking!"

EVEREST
"Why do people climb Everest? There's no reward at the top! It's like, 'Why do we keep pushing as a band? We're not anywhere near the top of this rock'n'roll mountain, but we're still fighting. We still love it. So you just don't stop, you keep going, you keep pushing."

SHIVER
"This song's beautiful. Lzzy wrote it about being tough to love. It's tough to love someone sometimes. It was more of a mellow ballad, like a few of them; they start with just a piano or an acoustic guitar, and then we take it, like, 'Alright, now let's make this sound like our band.'"

LIKE A WOMAN CAN
"This is one of my favourite songs on the record. We have been showing it to friends, and people are hearing it, and it gets such a different reaction from everybody. It's almost like an Amy Winehouse kind of feel. But hard rock!"

RAIN YOUR BLOOD ON ME
"This is fun! We recorded it without a click, which you can hear. It's just elastic and goes all over the place. I love the different feels. When the Maiden tour came, we were like, 'This song is perfect!' We got to play this on the tour!' It sounded great."

DARKNESS ALWAYS WINS
"Lzzy and I were sitting on our porch. We were talking about how we were sick of writing all these songs of, 'Here's an answer for your problem!', you know? Like, sometimes, shit just doesn't work out! And there is no way out but through."

GATHER THE LAMBS
"We went to this cool cemetery in Savannah, and there was something on one of those old graves – '*I gathered the lamb*', some Bible quote or something. 'That'd be a weird title!' We just went with it and we knocked it out."

WATCH OUT!
"Do you remember Jock Jams, those CDs? It was a compilation series in America in the 90s. I had this idea, 'We really need to make a hard rock jock jam!' That, '*Watch out, that bitch is out for blood!*' was an outro, and we're like, 'No! That's the chorus! Move that over here!' It became the theme of the song."

BROKEN DOLL
"Dave's [Cobb, producer] house in Savannah, where we recorded, is by the inner coastal waterway. There's a dock, and we were just sitting out there looking at the water, playing through chords: 'OK, who's got an idea?' We just start playing things and singing. It happened naturally. We dug into our 90s vibes on it."

K-I-L-L-I-N-G
"We're looking at the collection, and we're like, 'Alright, now we need some high-energy shit, what are we gonna do?' This is a no-brainer – just rhythm section insanity, and it's just fun. It's got the manic energy that balances the record."

I GAVE YOU EVERYTHING
"This was the last song that we did. We plugged everything in and knocked this out in a few hours. It made the record because, I think, it's great! I love when that shit comes together: 'Bam! Here's one!'"

HOW WILL YOU REMEMBER ME?
"It's like a funeral song. It was just a piano ballad thing, but Dave held us accountable to the rock, like, 'No! Come on, let's make it rock!' It's a beautiful power ballad. It's a good thing to think about, getting existential."

The newly engaged Katie and Jake

INSIDE THE CULT OF SLEEP TOKEN

The biggest new band of the decade attract devotion like no other – but why? We asked the worshippers who gathered to witness their landmark Download headlining set

WORDS: EMILY SWINGLE • PICTURES: KATJA OGRIN

It's not often that the sound of wind chimes twinkles across Donington Park, but then Download festival has never had a headliner like Sleep Token before. As this unlikely intro music intensifies, signalling the imminent start of the biggest and most important show of this enigmatic band's career, all eyes focus on the main stage. Many here are curious as to what all the fuss is about, but others have clearly pledged their allegiance to Vessel and are wearing the homemade robes and masks to prove it.

Sleep Token's sharp ascent has been staggering. In 2020, they were headlining the 900-capacity Islington Assembly Hall, but in 2023 they sold out London's Wembley Arena in under 10 minutes, before playing two nights at the city's vast 02 Arena the following year. Their latest album, *Even In Arcadia*, topped the charts on both sides of the Atlantic in May. But one of the biggest markers of their success is the fervent following they've built up. Even by metal's famously loyal standards, Sleep Token fans are devoted to their heroes.

The Cult Of Sleep Token is in evidence today. You're never far from someone in one of the band's t-shirts. Queue up for a burrito, and you might overhear someone explaining why they chose House Veridian over Feathered Host. Approach a loo and you may see a Vessel lookalike emerge, complaining about the lack of toilet paper. If there was a drinking game that involved knocking back a shot every time you spot a Sleep Token fan, there'd be a lot of alcoholic casualties scattered around the festival.

But why the devotion? Why do this band's fans go further than any other? That's why we're here today: to get to the heart of the cult of Sleep Token.

To non-converts, Sleep Token's elusive lore can feel intimidating – an extra barrier to break through. For disciples, though, immersing yourself in the theories, supposition and Easter eggs is part of what being a Sleep Token fan is about. An encyclopaedic knowledge is a badge of honour.

"I tried to explain all of the lore to my manager once," says Caitlin, a loyal fan from Glasgow, with a laugh. While her boss could barely make head nor tail of the theories, Caitlin is practically a scholar. She's in her element as she talks *Hammer* through them. She believes that the foundational idea of Vessel being a minion of the god Sleep, serving as a mouthpiece as he offers up praise in the form of sonic offerings, is just the beginning.

"Now, it feels like Vessel has grown and is trying to break away from Sleep," she insists, emphasising her point with a flourish of her Sleep Token-themed acrylic nails. "It feels like they're fighting back, trying to regain control."

The most recent addition to the lore comes in the form of House Veridian and Feathered Host, the two factions referenced in *Even In Arcadia*'s opening track, *Look To Windward*, with a call of, '*I live by the feather and die by the sword.*' It's another code for the fans to crack – some believe the two factions are at war with each other, while others reckon the opposing houses will eventually realise they can work together in harmony. There are even theories that voting between the two factions determined the final *Even In Arcadia* tracklisting (fans received emails allowing them to click on either crest, thereby opting into one), with some insisting an alternate Feathered Host track order entirely shifts the listening experience. Caitlin sighs as she admits she's still working out the puzzles, though any frustration is outweighed by excitement at the possibility of solving them.

Today, QR codes flash on the screens at the side of the stage, leading to an anagram for fans to decode. Is the big secret behind the two factions about to be revealed? Sadly not – instead, people get the chance to win House Veridian

Caitlin from Glasgow poses with Jerry, Sleep Token's unofficial mascot

James, with his repurposed Ghostface get-up

Naomi, knocking out the facepaint to dance to *Caramel* later

Lucky Rhys, who won himself a House Veridian coin

KATJA OGRIN

Ryan and Charlie, hoping to spot their pals from online fangroups at Download

KATJA OGRIN

"ANY TRAUMA, ANY STORY, THEY'VE WRITTEN SOMETHING FOR IT"

HATTIE

and Feathered Host coins from a pop-up stall, with a lucky winner getting to watch the show from the sound tower.

Still, people seem happy with this. Rhys is one. He's bagged a House Veridian coin with a little card bearing the tagline: 'The House Must Endure' (the Feathered Host one says 'The Cycle Must End'). Like many today, Rhys is in full Vessel regalia, including cloak and mask. Such is the mystery surrounding the frontman that he could even *be* Vessel. "I'm going to be onstage later," he jokes (at least we think he's joking – it *could* actually be Vessel behind that mask).

His outfit sums up the visual appeal of Sleep Token. A t-shirt or maybe a tattoo is as far as most music fans can go to show off their devotion to their idols. Here, elaborate costumes are par for the course.

"It's incredible to feel like part of something and connect with the community here," he says. "So many people have stopped for photos, asked about my outfit. It's brilliant."

It's a sentiment echoed by Hattie, who sports a Sleep Token sigil on her face and a Vessel tattoo on her arm. The robes and adornments are a form of instant recognition, a not-so-secret sign you're part of the cult.

"The amount of people who have stopped me to say hello today, it's been beautiful," she says. "I've spoken to so many people about how Sleep Token's music touches them, and it's so powerful connecting with everyone. It's bringing so many people together."

While the costumes make it easy to spot Sleep Token devotees, Hattie notes that the most committed fans aren't always the most obvious.

"There are so many people here who love Sleep Token, but I really wouldn't have expected them to love them," she explains. "In any other situation, I might not have met some of these people. But you talk to them, realise they love Sleep Token, and you can instantly find out the colour of their soul."

Colour of their soul?

Hattie, who feels Sleep Token help reveal the "colour of your soul"

Ed, decked out in a Pikachu hat for his first gig since 2010

"They'll immediately share something that they love with you, and I think that's when you show who you really are," she clarifies. "When you're open, that's how you really connect on a deep, emotional level."

She even considers Vessel, the band's masked frontman, to be in a unique position to be truly open with his audience. Rather than the mask being a barrier, a way of shielding emotions and hiding from the truth, she argues it allows Vessel to be truly free.

"Sometimes he cries onstage, and it's so earnest," she explains. "It's so emotional, and raw. Because it's like a way for him to be open, to voice his true feelings, without the fear of being judged. It makes me feel safe to express my own emotions – it's like he's giving you strength."

One of the more unexpected and amusing things about Sleep Token's rise is the reputation they've gained for being a "sexy" band, thanks to songs such as *The Summoning* and *Chokehold*. One fan, who wishes to remain anonymous, admits that the band's music is "all over my husband and I's sex playlists". Yet beyond this lustful aspect, Sleep Token's lyrics seem to hit their fans on a deep emotional level, no matter how mysterious or abstract they are.

"YOU DON'T GET TO DRESS UP VERY OFTEN IN REAL LIFE"

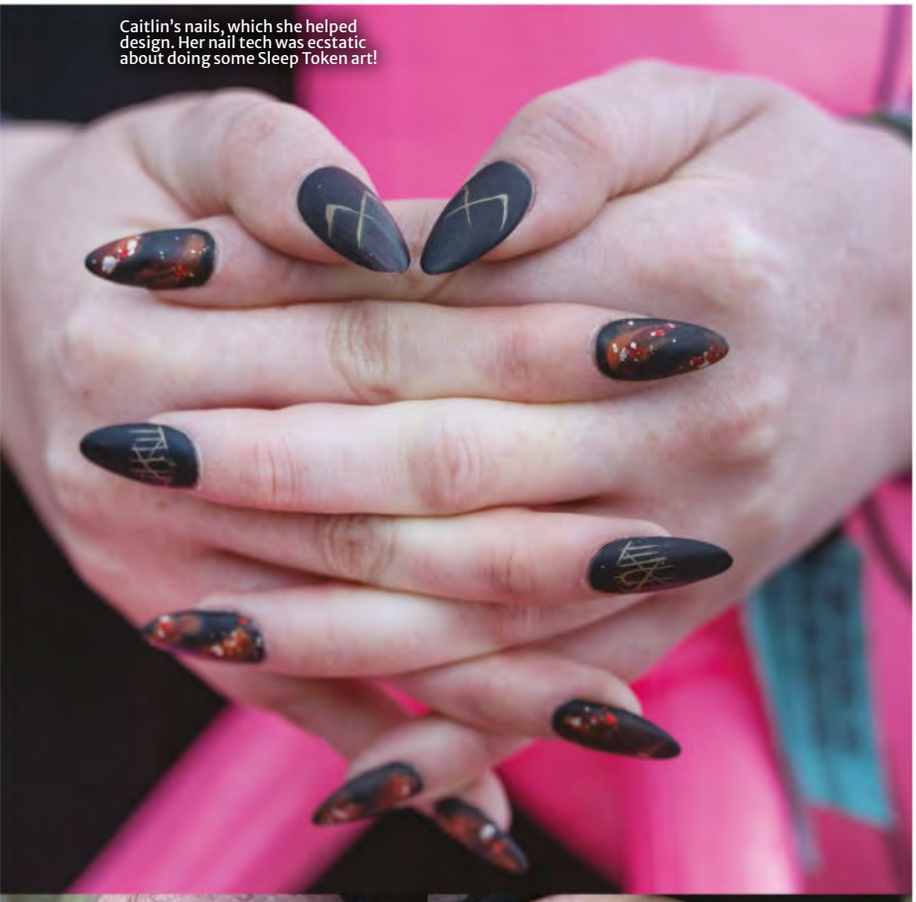
KATIE

"There's this melancholy and realism to their music, and it hits on so many levels," says James, a Vessel-impersonator whose look is completed by a Ghostface mask from the movie *Scream*, and some red paint. "There were themes on the last record, *Take Me Back To Eden*, surrounding narcissistic abuse – and I know the backstory is sometimes linked to sleep gods, but I saw a lot of my experiences within the songs. You can learn a lot about yourself, if you're willing to give it a chance."

The fact that Sleep Token are headlining Download has been a big talking point. For some people, the band's presence is the reason they're here in the first place. Ed, coated in black paint, explains how the community on a Sleep Token Facebook group encouraged him to attend this year's festival. It's the first gig he's been to since 2010.

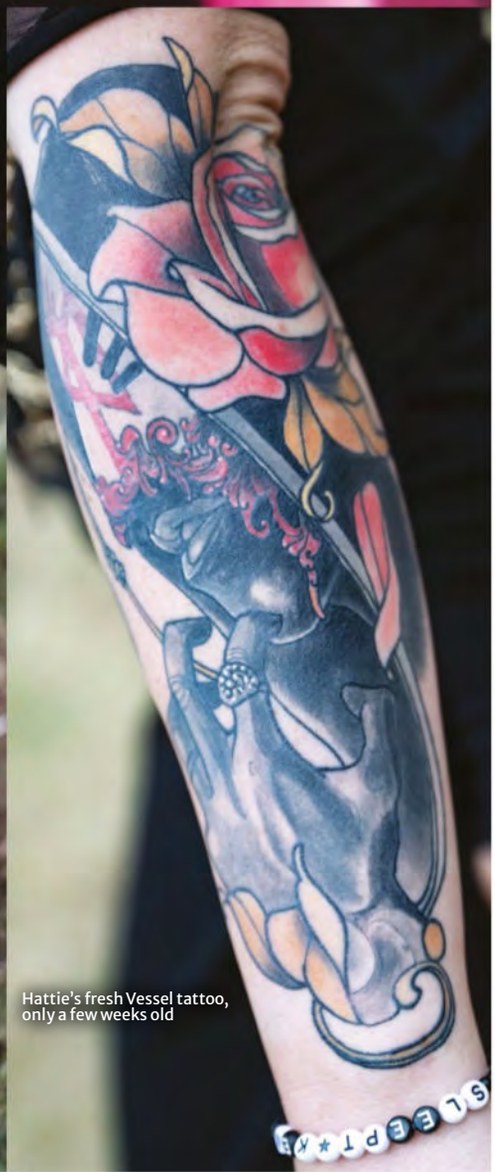
"I'd been apprehensive and worried about the crowds, but the Sleep Token community has been so open and welcoming," he says. He has facts to hand, too. "Forty-four per cent of attendees this year were new, and I think that's partly thanks to Sleep Token – I'm proof of that. Their

KATJA OGRIN



Caitlin's nails, which she helped design. Her nail tech was ecstatic about doing some Sleep Token art!

Inked devotion: Rhys's Vessel leg



Hattie's fresh Vessel tattoo, only a few weeks old

music is just a great way of introducing people to the metal scene, but also introducing heavy metal fans to softer stuff, too."

Inevitably, not everyone is happy. When Sleep Token were announced as Download headliners last year, metal's gatekeepers predictably melted down. Some argued that they'd been unfairly fast-tracked to the top of the bill, pointing to the fact that Korn – who close out the festival on Sunday night – are only now headlining the main stage, after eight previous appearances. Others simply objected to Sleep Token on a musical level. But as James – he of the Ghostface mask – rightly points out, change isn't just good, it's necessary.

"Just give it three songs," he adds. "You'll find something you like."

Whether the haters will agree with that remains to be seen, but the breadth and diversity of Sleep Token's sound – from djent and metalcore to R'n'B and pop – is certainly part of the attraction for their fans.

"It's a lot of genres, which opens it up to a lot of people, but it also teaches you to be more musically intellectual," says Katie, who is here with her partner, Jake. The latter says he instantly connected with the band the first time he came across them.

"It was seeing a recording of their *Room Below* set," he recalls. "When I heard *Blood Sport*, I was really drawn in. And then [2023 single] *The Summoning* came out. Obviously, that's when it really exploded, for the whole world, really. It was clear they were going to be big. There was this amazing buzz."

Katie and Jake have a deep connection to Download itself too. They met at the festival in 2018, and Jake popped the question today in anticipation of tonight's set. Katie said yes. Both are marking the occasion by wearing handcrafted outfits – Jake in a cloak and black facepaint, Katie in a cloak and gold mask. She made the latter herself.

"It was two days of labouring over all the little details," she laughs. "I would get home from work and just get painting, gluing. But you don't get to dress up very often in real life."

At 9.20pm, those wind chimes begin drifting out across the field. For the Vessel lookalikes, face-masked acolytes, newly engaged couples and anyone else who is emotionally invested in Sleep Token, the big moment has arrived.

As the build-up climaxes, the curtain drops to reveal a spectacular stage set based around an intricate cliff-face/monument design. The mystique that so many people talk about is in evidence, while the set itself goes down well among the faithful – even if the doubters are unlikely to have their minds changed.

But widespread approval isn't what being a Sleep Token fan is about. As so many of the people we've talked to have put it, it's as much about community and the sense of belonging that comes with it. A few hours earlier, Hattie – the fan with the Sleep Token sigil on her face – explained what it meant to her to be here.

"I normally get nervous about crowds, but dressing up like Vessel today has made me feel so comfortable," she said. "I feel like I'm being me. And I know I'll be able to feel safe in the crowd, supported by the people who understand the music and feel the connection that I do. It's like a family.

"Any trauma, any story, they've written something for it. People say they hate them, that they're ruining metal, but it's not a battle. The band have never tried to be in a battle, they just want to express themselves. And they mean a lot to people, so why is that a bad thing?"

***EVEN IN ARCADIA* IS OUT NOW VIA RCA**

THE HAMMER INTERVIEW

DARON MALAKIAN

From class clown to maverick multi-platinum superstar, the System Of A Down guitarist and Scars On Broadway frontman has done it all

WORDS: STEPHEN HILL • PICTURES: TRAVIS SHINN

PRESS/TRAVIS SHINN

For someone who has written some of the wildest and weirdest music of the last 30 years, Daron Malakian is a man of remarkably simple pleasures. When *Hammer* asks the System Of A Down and Scars On Broadway guitarist (and singer in the latter) what he does outside of music, there's a long pause.

"Not much! I watch some sports with my father-in-law, play a bit of golf," he says with a laugh, aware of the apparent mundanity of it.

But then music has been Daron's major obsession ever since he began collecting Kiss albums at the age of four. Born and raised in Los Angeles to Armenian parents, he cut his teeth on the mid-90s club circuit with his first band, Soil, who would evolve into System Of A Down. A string of successful albums followed, including 1998's self-titled debut and 2001's multi-platinum *Toxicity*, before the band went on hiatus in 2006.

System have periodically resurfaced since then, though they haven't made an album since 2005's *Mezmerize* and *Hypnotize* one-two (he brushes off talk of new System music today). Instead, Scars On Broadway have become his main creative outlet, albeit a sporadic one. Launched as a solo project in 2008 during SOAD's initial break, they've just released their third album, *Addicted To The Violence*. Some of the songs date back years, but the record's themes remain relevant, from society's desensitisation to violence (*Killing Spree*) to frustration at divisive, dogmatic politics (*Your Lives Burn*).

As he puts it: "The world keeps evolving and continues to be more and more ridiculous."

"WE WOULD GET BOOED OFFSTAGE IN EUROPE"

It's been seven years since the last Scars On Broadway album. What inspired you to resurrect the band and release a new album?
"The timing was just right. I don't sit down and think about writing an album; I write songs, and sometimes inspiration just hits you, and you feel like some of these songs that are floating around in your consciousness are ready to be heard."

Were the songs all written with Scars On Broadway in mind?
"No. Some of these songs are really old, some of them are new and collaborations with Orbel [Babayan, Scars On Broadway guitarist]. I can't tell you, 'I'm gonna go home and write these great songs tonight!' When a song comes, it's something that impresses me. I'm like, 'Hell yeah! Another one happened!' I just try and listen and be sensitive, and when the time is right, let people hear them. The time for Scars felt right."

The themes of songs such as *Your Lives Burn* and *Killing Spree* seem very relevant right now.
"*Killing Spree* I wrote a long, long time ago. Now, you see someone on a subway being taunted, abused or hurt and you'll see people recording it instead of helping them... you'll see a kid walk into his school and shoot his classmates... you'll see riots in the streets – all this is happening. And a song like *Killing Spree* to me is not for or against any of it, it's just 'This is the world I live in.' Some people are afraid to talk about certain things like that, so I'm just not editing myself. It's just the world."

You grew up in an artistic household. What was that like?
"Yeah, both my parents are artists. My dad paints abstract-style paintings and art was always around me. My approach to art is very inspired by my dad. My dad has never given an art exhibition; his stuff has never been in museums or galleries or anything. He paints for himself. He has decades' worth of paintings in his house that he doesn't even care to show anybody, but they're great. And he doesn't do it for anybody else. He does it for him. And whether I was in System Of A Down or Scars, if I had a fanbase or not, I'd be doing what I do."

Did your upbringing encourage you to go into an artistic direction?
"No, nobody pushed me into the musical direction, as far back as I could remember. Music has always been important to me. There's never any memory I have in my life that music wasn't a part of. I started collecting records at four, five, six years old."

What were you like at school?
"I was kind of like the class loudmouth, kind of the clown. Me and my friends were like the dudes that got into fights. I was the one guy that liked metal – all my friends were into gangsta rap and shit. I dropped out of high school, but my friends now are all my friends from 30 years ago, and most of them are plumbers. Honestly, I don't really have like this artsy crowd that I hang out with or anything like that."

System Of A Down came up through the mid-90s LA club scene. As four Armenian guys, how different did you feel to the other bands at the time?
"At first nobody wanted to sign us, because we didn't sound like Korn or Limp Bizkit, and we were four Armenian guys! I mean, what the fuck is an Armenian to somebody that lives in Kentucky?! They don't even know what Armenians are! And we looked like we were just fucking aliens to people, the way our stage presence was and the way our look was at the time. Serj [Tankian, SOAD singer] is a very different, unique kind of frontman, I'm the guitar player who sings and screams and does all the crazy stuff. People didn't get it at first, but *we* got it."

What changed?
"We just went out and did what we did. We were young and hungry, we believed in what we were doing. You've got to understand, we were an army before we were signed, we were fucking tearing down the Sunset Strip. Our shows were packed when we weren't signed. It started with our group of friends, but that shit grew and grew and grew, and we became the biggest band on the Sunset Strip."

You were lumped in with the nu metal scene, but that doesn't really feel accurate for what System Of A Down were doing.
"We were lucky that there was a scene. We were able to play, and play in front of audiences that came to see those other bands. But I don't think anybody sounds like we did. I don't think we felt like we didn't belong and I don't feel like we *did* belong. But there's so many fucking genres and then there are subgenres of the subgenre, it just gets lost. System Of A Down and Scars, that's what I do. I don't look at what other bands are doing and say, 'Well, I've got to do that to fit in with those guys.' But for some reason we fit into that whole [nu metal] thing. That's just the time that we existed."

Some great bands came from that scene.
"I'll say one thing about the original nu metal bands – Deftones, Korn, all the ones that were the first, and add us to that list – they were all doing something unique. We were all the kids that grew up listening to Metallica and Slayer, all that fucking thrash stuff, but we weren't copying it. We were taking that influence and we were bringing in other things, other influences, and creating something new with that heavy sound. All those copy bands, I don't

give a shit about any of them. The ones that came out and started their own thing and did their own thing, those bands deserve credit."

Speaking of thrash bands, one of your first big tours was with Slayer.
"Our first tour in the US and our first tour in Europe were both opening for Slayer. Some people got it, some people didn't. We would get booed off the stage in some of those countries."

You certainly had a polarising effect.
"The approach I took to those Slayer shows was that if they didn't start chanting 'Slayer!' while we were playing, I would make them start chanting 'Slayer!' We just didn't let that faze us. I remember we were in Poland and people didn't get it at all. They booed us off the stage, they threw things at us, they threw coins, they threw a bagel at Serj! But we just kept doing what we do and moving forward. Like, if I was a comedian, I find my jokes funny – if everyone else isn't laughing, I don't care."

It's funny you mention comedy. System Of A Down were pigeonholed as a political band, but there's humour in a lot of your songs.
"I appreciate you saying that, because what you're saying is what I feel. People would get really stuck on the politics. The bandmembers, we don't all agree on one thing when it comes to politics. I think when there's members of the band that are a little outspoken about their politics, people think that everyone's politics are the same as what Serj is saying or whatever John [Dolmayan, SOAD drummer] is saying. But there are more layers than just politics."

There's plenty of your lyrics that are clearly not political!
"Sure. I write whatever is spat out of me at that moment. I didn't actually sit there and write on a piece of paper *'My cock is much bigger than yours!'* [from SOAD's *Cigaro*]. I just said that while I was riffing and I was like, 'OK, I don't even know what the fuck that means.' But that's how I felt at that fucking moment."

Those different moods are what so many people love about your work in System and Scars On Broadway.
"Because life is not one topic. Life has moments when you're happy, when you're sad, when you're funny, when you're an asshole, where you're serious. It's got to have all of that because, in me, all of that exists, and if I can't express those sides of me, then I feel like I'm in a box as an artist. I think the one thing System and Scars both share is the different layers of emotions, character and feelings that come out in the music that I write. That's because I don't sit there and say, 'Well I gotta be heavy metal' all the time."

How did the songwriting dynamic work when you were creating music for SOAD?
"That's hard for me to answer, because I feel like my songwriting process is quite different to a lot of artists. *Chop Suey!* for example, I wrote that on tour in the back of the bus. I had a guitar, an acoustic guitar, and I just wrote that arrangement. I don't write riffs, I write songs. *Chop Suey!* I brought in with the vocals. Sometimes Serj would use that melody and write different lyrics – for example the original lyrics for *Chop Suey!* were: *'Wake up / Tell me what you think about tomorrow / Is there gonna be a pain in sorrow? / Tell me what you think about the people / Is there going to be another sequel?'* That was my line. But then it's Serj saying *'Wake up, grab a brush...'*. We would collaborate in that way, but I'd say 85 to 90% of the time it was me bringing in the whole thing."

PRESS/TRAVISSHINN

Scars On Broadway (left to right): Orbel Babayan, Daron Malakian, Roman Lomtadze, Niko Chantziantoniou

"WHEN SYSTEM TOOK A HIATUS IT WAS DIFFICULT FOR ME"

Did you know that you were on to something special with those songs?
"I wrote all of the *Toxicity* record while I was still living with my parents. They would hear me playing my guitar in my room, and when *Toxicity* came out, they would hear *Aerials* or *Chop Suey!* on the radio or MTV and they'd be like, 'Oh that's the one we heard you playing in your room all the time!' So I think they knew more than me."

***Toxicity* was a hugely successful album when it was released in 2001. How weird was it for you when it all blew up?**
"If you'd have asked 14-year-old Daron what he was going to do when his dreams came true, he'd have said, 'Fuck yeah! I'm gonna party! I'm gonna be like Mötley Crüe!' Then it happened, and I actually became even more focused on my writing. I didn't really want to leave the house when I was off tour, I still don't. Being recognised in public, it was weird – people walking up and wanting their picture with me. I just knew I needed to write songs, that's what was gonna continue this train, not my fucking picture in a magazine."

SOAD went on hiatus in 2006. Was Scars On Broadway an important outlet for you at that point?
"When System took the hiatus, I'm not gonna lie, it was difficult for me at first because that's not really what I wanted. But I can't force other people to do something just because I wanted it. But my first thing was, 'OK, if I release music, I need an outlet for that', and Scars became that outlet. I'll be honest with you, man, I'm just as proud of the Scars stuff as anything I've done. I think some of my best shit is on Scars."

System haven't made an album since 2005, and you've made three Scars On Broadway albums, but presumably you never stop writing. How many songs are you sitting on?
"I don't know about thousands, but I've got a few. If I had a nine to five job, I would probably still come back home and write music for myself. But even though we're not making records with System after all these years, I still do write because it's an itch and I just got to itch it. It's like a child plays with his toys. You don't play with your toys because you're playing for somebody else, right? You're playing for your own amusement."

So many people would love to hear those songs.
"Look, I'm very aware that there's an audience out there and there's people that want to hear from me and that's amazing. Honestly, I'm very blessed, my life is fucking like... I got to pinch myself. But I'm also kind of lazy too when it when it comes to making an album."

Maybe there's a big box set of unreleased Daron Malakian songs waiting to be released one day.
"Ha ha ha! Trust me, I tell myself, 'Dude, you really need to start releasing more music.' I even tell my guitar player in Scars On Broadway, 'Remind me that I need to start recording, man!' I just wish that was my motivation, because if that was my motivation, then I would. I get caught up in my own head, in my own world, and it's not a priority to me. So, I got to make it a priority and start recording my shit. I just need to motivate myself to do it." H

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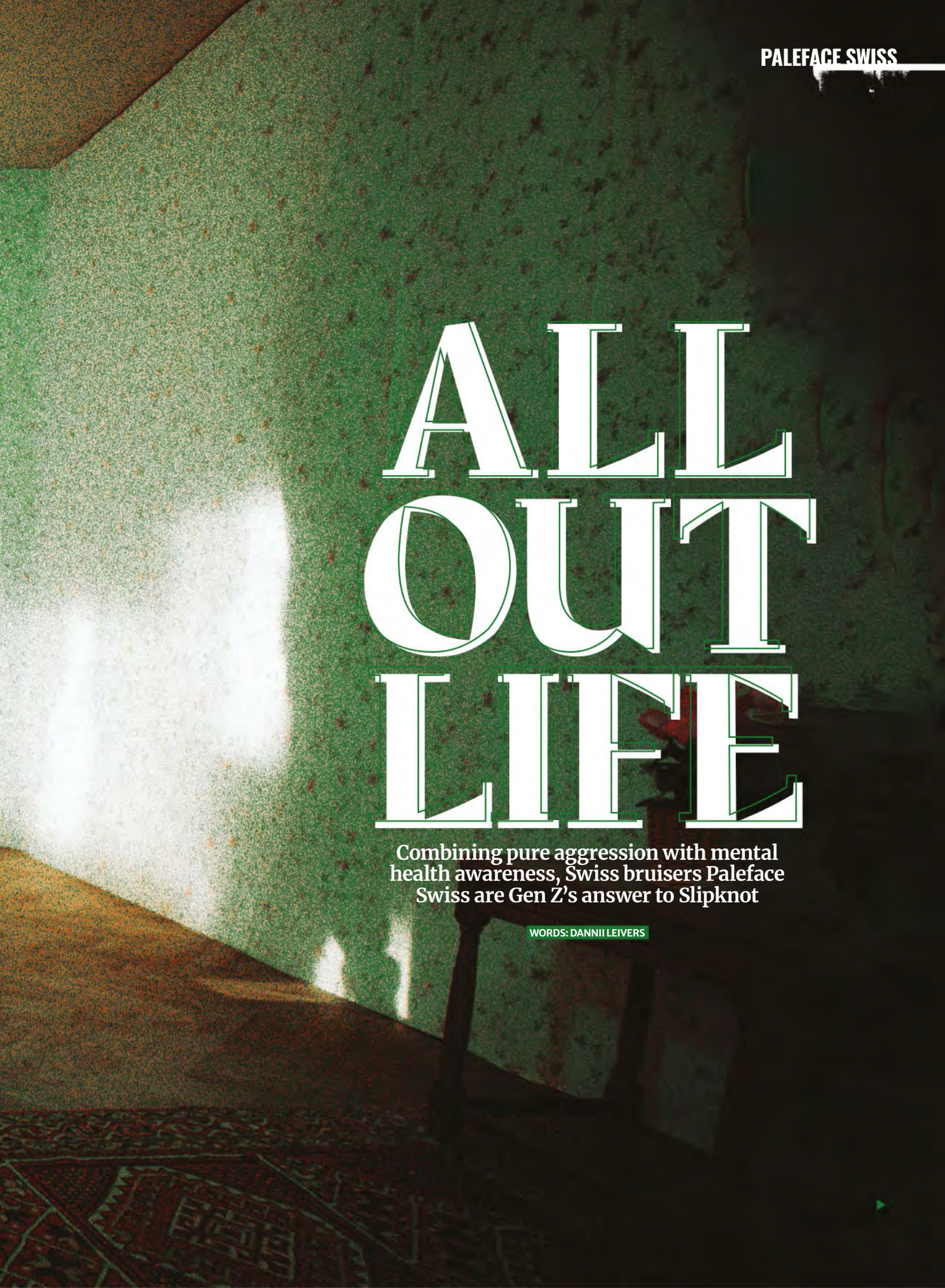

ALL OUT LIFE

Combining pure aggression with mental health awareness, Swiss bruisers Paleface Swiss are Gen Z's answer to Slipknot

WORDS: DANNII LEIVERS

Inside a sweltering room in Leeds, 1,000 people are hyperventilating en masse. As Paleface Swiss vocalist Marc 'Zelli' Zellweger leans over the barrier, rapping, screaming and gasping his way through an almost comically brutal *Nail To The Tooth*, the crowd keep pace with every word, eyes bulging, fists punching the air. The riff that follows is filthier than a slaughterhouse, before Zelli randomly bellows the weirdest mosh call you'll hear all year: "We are the reason for the holes in the Swiss cheese!"

"The singalong stuff is something that gets me all the time," Zelli tells *Hammer* later with a huge grin. "That's the thing I live for. I don't think that my style of vocals is super-easy to sing along to!"

Only a year earlier, Paleface Swiss were opening shows in Europe, as third support to Bay Area hardcore band Lionheart, after Suicide Silence and Kublai Khan TX. Since then, they've played massive stages at Las Vegas's Sick New World and Spain's Resurrection festivals, while the first half of 2025 has seen them tour the UK, Europe and the USA – this time as headliners. Many of the UK venues were upgraded, such was the demand for tickets; their live shows are an energetic whirlwind of fun and brutality. In a few days they'll hit the road again, this time to the European festival circuit, with a slot on Bloodstock's main stage.

"Honestly, I don't know," Zelli responds, when we ask him what's behind their sharp, recent upswing. "And I don't really want to know why people like us, because then you end up doing it for them rather than doing what feels authentic."

The 25-year-old singer is chatting to *Hammer* from his Zurich home, dressed in a baggy black t-shirt, his ice-white, bleached hair in sharp contrast to a huge, black and white skull-emblazoned tapestry that's hanging on the wall behind him. He's friendly and funny, admitting that the band are still getting to grips with being one of the hottest rising deals in metal.

"Towards the end of the European tour, for the very first time in my life, I lost my voice," he says. "We played our longest set we've ever played, and played so many shows in a row with barely any off-days. I had to make the changes and adjustments that my voice and my body needs... it's a learning process."

Paleface Swiss formed in Zurich in 2017 through mutual friends, but things started ramping up when they released their second album, 2022's *Fear & Dagger*. Rapturously received by deathcore and beatdown aficionados, it was an upgrade on the fledgling violence of their early material – a mix of hardcore, deathcore and thrash that felt genuinely unhinged and unpredictable. They followed it up earlier this year with *Cursed*, an even more dynamic album that ups the aggression and introduces a good dollop of nu metal into the mix, culminating in recent single *River Of Sorrows* – a grungy ballad with a blistering middle eight. It's a volte-face that shows the band's ever-expanding range.

"I don't really know why the deathcore name is so attached to the band's name, because we've never had the typical deathcore breakdowns and vocals," shrugs Zelli.

There is, however, one clearly distinguishable influence in their sound. At its most potent, *Cursed* resembles Slipknot at their most depraved. The masked band got Zelli hooked on metal in his early teens, and he recently met drummer Eloy Casagrande and bassist Alessandro 'Vman' Venturella backstage at a festival.

"I was right next to Clown's green room, and he was like, 'Excuse me, can I enter my room?'" Zelli laughs. "I would never be brave enough to say, 'What's up?'"

Surely a support slot with Slipknot is on Paleface's bucket list?

"We're working on it!"

Zelli credits bands such as Slipknot and Mushroomhead with helping him channel and calm his teenage angst.

"I'm not good at talking about emotions," he admits. "I was walking through the streets of Switzerland listening to this really aggressive music, and I felt better. I'm not as angry as I could be because of the music. It took away all the anger that I had."

Now he hopes Paleface Swiss's music will have the same effect on others. The lyrics of their songs directly tackle mental health, depression and suicide, topics that are given short shrift in their home country.

"No one really talks about mental health in Switzerland," he sighs. "It's more about careers and making money."

A lyric on one of Paleface's heaviest tracks, *Judgement Day*, pours scorn on this fact: *'The neutrality Switzerland is known for globally / Does not apply to Paleface / They came to destroy.'*

"I don't want to have the typical Swiss behaviour when it comes to mental health," he says, explaining the lyric. "When I want to say something, I just say it straight."

The video for *River Of Sorrows* is perhaps the best example of their uncompromising approach to art, depicting a grief-stricken Zelli sitting in his bedroom next to a hanging body. He wrote the song about a break-up, but hopes fans will relate to the imagery in their own way.

"It doesn't have to be my vision. If you see something else and it helps you, goal reached," he says.

Their attitude is clear on *666*, the intro track on the *Fear & Dagger* album, which contains a recording of a fan having a schizophrenic episode. The fan, who had been documenting their episodes in an effort to better understand their condition, asked if the band wanted to use it in one of their songs. It's a difficult, harrowing and deeply personal listen, its impact not too dissimilar to Korn's 1994 track, *Daddy*, which saw vocalist Jonathan Davis screaming and crying in the vocal booth as he recalled abuse he experienced as a child at the hands of a babysitter.

"I wanted people to know that we didn't want to just make money with it, but we wanted to open people's eyes," says Zelli, who explains that at first the band were unsure if it was the right thing to do. They decided the recording was an opportunity to spread awareness of the condition.

"We tried to treat this topic with so much respect, and the response has been amazing."

"I WAS RIGHT NEXT TO CLOWN'S GREEN ROOM!"

MARC 'ZELLI' ZELLWEGER

Zelli wants the Paleface Swiss community to be a safe space for fans. The track *Enough?*, from *Cursed*, is a challenge to a type of male metal fan who's happy to posture and pit, but doesn't think the scene is a place for meaningful self-examination:

'You are tall and you bang on your chest and you only listen to aggressive music / And I'm sitting here, and I'm singing about my own feelings...'

"I'm not a fan of really masculine behaviour. I'm from Switzerland, one of the most peaceful countries in the world." He snorts. "I grew up being surrounded by cows."

The band recently caused a stir when Zelli and drummer Cassiano 'Cassi' Toma shared a mid-set kiss onstage.

"You cannot believe how many tough guys walked out every single night," he says. "That proves to me that I'm doing the right thing. We lose so many fans, but I don't want them to be our supporters. Please just fuck off."

That bloody-minded dedication to their morals and vision will only propel Paleface Swiss to greater heights. Although they work with the Nuclear Blast-affiliated Blood Blast to distribute their music, the band remain DIY and unsigned. From merch, to management and music videos, it's a small, close-knit team of friends and extended family that run the show behind the scenes.

"We want to keep it that way for as long as possible," affirms Zelli.

Success at all costs, he says, is not the game plan. Despite their rise, Paleface know that slow and steady will ensure their longevity.

"I want to reach the very top," Zelli smiles. "But by having as much fun and making it as healthy as possible."

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Paleface Swiss (left to right): Yannick Lehmann, Tommy Lee, Marc 'Zelli' Zellweger, Cassiano 'Cassi' Toma

PALEFACE SWISS MATHS

Three albums that helped shape their sound

SLIPKNOT
SLIPKNOT *(1999)*
Zelli: "I really love how raw this album sounds. I feel like Corey Taylor didn't have any technique at all, just like I never had. I felt like, if he can do it, I can do it."

+

KNOCKED LOOSE
POP CULTURE *(2014)*
Zelli: "It was something I had never heard before. I like Bryan Garris's vocals. He does not need to have the craziest vocal flow in the world because his voice has so much charisma."

+

NF
THE SEARCH *(2019)*
Zelli: "The way NF describes his emotions and the way he articulates his words is incredible. I steal so many of his flows, I don't care. It's so good. Does he know? I hope he fucking does."

"LOAD WAS A BIG FUCK YOU!"

Underrated masterpiece or epic misfire? As Metallica's divisive 1996 album gets a blockbusting reissue, we break it down track by controversial track

WORDS: PAUL BRANNIGAN

PRESS/ANTON CORBIJN

It's the spring of 1996, and I'm in Right Track Recording studios in New York, where Metallica are putting the finishing touches to what will become *Load*. Listening to the playback, I somewhat ungraciously suggest to Lars Ulrich that it sounds like Metallica have become the sort of mainstream rock band that their younger selves would have despised.

The drummer gives an exaggerated and prolonged yawn.

"We've had that for years," he scoffs. "When we put *Fade To Black* on *Ride The Lightning*, people were saying that Slayer were the alternative to Metallica because we were playing this acoustic garbage. People should get off their asses to topple us. Like, here's a guitar – blow us away if you think you can."

Throughout the 1990s, Metallica were determined to push creative boundaries and give themselves the freedom to stretch and redefine their sound.

"The minute you stop exploring, then just sit down and fucking die," drummer Lars Ulrich declared bullishly ahead of the release of his band's sixth album, giving advance warning that the San Francisco quartet had no intention of merely retreading familiar ground to serve up *Metallica II*.

Not for the first time in Metallica's history, *Load* met with a vocal and vociferous backlash before the album even emerged, when the group unveiled a striking new image - Haircuts! Piercings! Eyeliner! Feather boas! – in promotional photos. But when the album was released in June 1996, *Metal Hammer* declared it a triumph, awarding it 4.5 stars out of a possible five stars, and stating that the bold 14-song set confirmed that the band had "continued their evolution into the best heavy metal band of the modern age". And though he would later admit to some misgivings about the record, in 1996 frontman James Hetfield had little time for those who were unsettled or aggrieved by the band's desire to keep moving forward.

"People run around and cry, 'They didn't make the music I wanted. His hair looks funny,'" James told *Rolling Stone* magazine. "Listen past all the bullshit. Listen to the tunes."

Years later, Lars would look back on the album as "a big 'Fuck you'... It was a challenge to the heavy metal community," he said, "and I'm proud of that, because once in a while the heavy metal community needs a good fucking kick up its ass."

In the end *Load* would go on to sell five million copies in the US alone – not *Black Album* numbers, but hardly a flop. With a hefty new multi-disc reissue having just landed, this is a good time to break down Metallica's most misunderstood album track by track.

AIN'T MY BITCH

Let's not sugarcoat it: *Ain't My Bitch* represents the worst introduction to any Metallica album, ever. But, with the benefit of hindsight, you can divine the intention behind this bluesy bar-room brawl of a song – raw like mid-70s ZZ Top, and powered by the 'fuck you' spirit of early Motörhead, *Ain't My Bitch* is all about defiant, 'You want some?' confrontation, perfectly summed up by James's bellowed lyric '*And now it's time to kiss your ass goodbye!*'

Metallica may have been the biggest metal band in the world at the time, but here they sound like the scrappy, snotty hooligans they were when James and Lars first got together in Los Angeles garages.

2 X 4

Introduced to the world at a fanclub-only 'secret' show at London's now-demolished LA2 club on August 23, 1995, three days before the quartet's Escape From The Studio show at the Monsters Of Rock festival at Donington Park, *2 x 4* is the very definition of the 'less is more' attitude Metallica first took on board with *The Black Album*.

Heavily influenced by Southern rock linchpins Lynyrd Skynyrd and James's buddies Corrosion Of Conformity, this was the new "greasy" Metallica sound that Lars enthused about when he talked up *Load* to the world's media, but sadly this simplistic, basic boogie runs out of steam long before it reaches the halfway point of its frankly unnecessary five-and-a-half-minutes runtime.

THE HOUSE JACK BUILT

One of the most underrated songs on *Load*, *The House Jack Built* suffers somewhat from its placement as track three on the running order, initially sounding somewhat "stock" (to use a damning phrase later famously employed by Lars during the making of *St. Anger*) when following on from the album's underwhelming opening songs.

Perhaps most notable musically for Kirk Hammett's use of a 'talk box' effect, the song finds James musing on human frailty and mortality. Metallica have never performed this song live.

UNTIL IT SLEEPS

Until It Sleeps represents the moment that *Load* truly kicks into a higher gear. A huge departure from Metallica's signature sound and bearing the influences of Tom Waits and The Cure, it's a Southern Gothic meditation upon death and grief. The song's lyrics were written by James in the wake of learning that his father Virgil had been diagnosed with incurable cancer. Virgil Hetfield passed away on February 29, 1996, before the album was completed.

> "PEOPLE GAVE ME THE FINGER DURING *UNTIL IT SLEEPS*"
> JAMES HETFIELD

Until It Sleeps was the first single released from *Load*, and, at the time, was one of the songs most derided by purists who believed that the album represented a 'sell out' by the band.

"There were definitely some people who went out of their way to stand in front of me during *Until It Sleeps* and give me the finger, and go, like, 'You suck,'" James recalled in a 1997 interview. "I'd blow 'em a kiss and they'd get steamed! It was great."

KING NOTHING

The fourth single released from *Load*, the stomping *King Nothing* shares a certain amount of DNA with *Enter Sandman*, not least in its closing 10 seconds when James sings, '*Off to never-never land.*'

The echo with Metallica's mainstream-penetrating 1991 anthem is deliberate – the message at the heart of *King Nothing* is that success and the fulfilment of dreams doesn't necessarily equate to happiness. '*Careful what you wish, you may regret it,*' James sings at one point. '*Careful what you wish, you just might get it.*'

The frontman had struggled with mental health and substance abuse issues from his teenage years, and, for those who were listening properly, *King Nothing* is an admission that such concerns are not erased when one seemingly attains everything one has ever wished for.

HERO OF THE DAY

Demoed in 'The Dungeon', the basement studio in Lars Ulrich's house, on December 10, 1994, *Hero Of The Day* originally bore the working title *Mouldy*, as its central major key motif sounded to James and Lars like a riff Bob Mould – former leader of acclaimed 80s hardcore band Hüsker Dü – might have written.

The second single released from *Load*, *Hero Of The Day* remains one of its most striking and original compositions, a slow-burning, understated but undeniably powerful hymn to the human spirit, with its protagonist drawing upon reserves of strength in the face of adversity and hardship. Lyrics such as '*So build the wall, behind it crawl, and hide until it's light*' are

Metallica 2.0: Their new look for the release of *Load*

PRESS/ANTONCORBIJN

James at his most empathetic, an acknowledgement that not all battles can be won by confrontation.

BLEEDING ME

Concerning itself with themes of survival, fortitude, faith and renewal, *Bleeding Me* is one of James's most open-hearted songs, with its lyrics written during a soul-searching winter hunting trip to rural Wyoming.

"Some wild shit happened up there," James later suggested. "It inspires you... you can get way into yourself."

Informed by thoughts of his dying father, and his own journey to adulthood, *Bleeding Me* sees the singer at his most raw, lyrically. '*I'm digging my way to something / I'm digging my way to something better,*' he sings, his words shot through with a determination to shake off negative thoughts and the ghosts of the past.

Undeniably shaped by the frontman's increasing admiration for the music crafted by mid-90s Corrosion Of Conformity, *Bleeding Me* remains one of the most powerful, superbly controlled songs in Metallica's catalogue.

CURE

Such is the brilliance of *Bleeding Me* that whatever song followed it on was destined to be overshadowed, but even with that caveat, *Cure* is one of the weakest and least-engaging songs on the record, to the extent that it probably should have been left off *Load* entirely.

It starts off promisingly with James's spoken word intro incorporating an intriguing lyrical idea ('*The man takes another bullet / He keeps them all within*') but quickly becomes aimless, its mediocre riff and uninspired rhythm plodding on without any sense of purpose. That Metallica have never played the song live tells its own story.

POOR TWISTED ME

Poor Twisted Me is Metallica at their loosest and least uptight, serving up a Southern-fried honky-tonk rocker with a '*woe is me*' lyric that verges on parody. It's another song indebted to Lynyrd Skynyrd, with slide guitar, bluesy hooks and James living out his Southern outlaw fantasies. Undoubtedly fun to record, and initially quite charming in its obvious musical hero worship, it's another song that, with all due respect, really should have been consigned to the studio bin.

WASTING MY HATE

The antsy *Wasting My Hate* was inspired by a story that country star Waylon Jennings shared with James. As the Metallica singer recalled in a 1996 interview with *Rolling Stone*, Waylon was eating in a café when he had a feeling that he was being

Kirk, Lars, Jason and James in September 1996, well aware of the criticism their new album was receiving

stared out by a man sitting behind the wheel of a Cadillac in the parking lot.

Waylon told James that he exchanged cold, hard stares with the man for a full 45 minutes before deciding to step outside and confront him... at which point he realised that his nemesis was actually sleeping, and not eyeballing him at all.

"Man, I just wasted all my hate on that guy," the singer told James with a laugh.

This idea is at the core of this country-tinged rocker, which, clocking in at under four minutes, is the most succinct statement on *Load*. It's a rather slight track, but pleasingly direct and hard to dislike, with a greasy, naggingly insistent riff.

MAMA SAID

One of the more controversial tracks on *Load* when the album was released, the melancholic *Mama Said* is an unashamed country and western ballad, influenced by Lynyrd Skynyrd's *Tuesday's Gone*. In an interview with *Mojo* magazine, James revealed that the song is a reflection upon his relationship with his late mother, themed around a prodigal son returning home to make peace with his estranged parents, only to later realise that his mother has passed and his questions for her must remain unanswered. That Metallica felt emboldened to include this song on *Load* is a measure of their confidence at the time, and their comfort in their own skin, and the passing of time has only strengthened the song's subtle power.

THORN WITHIN

Another *Load* song that has never been played live, *Thorn Within* features one of the album's coolest riffs, and most thoughtful lyrics, and yet never impacts as it might. Something of a sequel to the bitter, raging *Dyer's Eve* from *...And Justice For All*, its lyric finds James at his most compassionate, mature and empathetic, with the song's protagonist reflecting on memories of his upbringing and asking forgiveness for his own youthful hardheadness and lack of understanding. On a more tightly edited album, *Thorn Within* may have shone brighter.

RONNIE

Metallica's version of Pearl Jam's *Jeremy*, concerning itself with a school shooting in Washington State in the 1990s, this is one of the weakest songs they've ever recorded. It's a song aiming for gravitas and profundity that somehow ends up sounding trite, perhaps because, unlike *Load*'s stronger songs, James never sounds like he truly believes in the words he is singing. Once again, it bears the influence of Lynyrd Skynyrd, but never captures the heart or soulfulness with which the Jacksonville, Florida band's best songs are imbued.

"HEAVY METAL NEEDS A GOOD FUCKING KICK UP ITS ASS"
LARS ULRICH

THE OUTLAW TORN

Arguably the greatest song that Metallica released in the 1990s, *The Outlaw Torn* is *Load*'s true masterpiece: an atmospheric, cinematic anthem that deals with loss, grief, pain and regret, without offering any easy solutions.

Like an extension of *The Unforgiven*, *The Outlaw Torn* is a brooding, haunting, existential epic. *'I wait my whole lifetime for you,'* sings James, like a man doomed to wander the Earth forever, searching in vain for answers, never attaining a state of peace. As great as it is here, however, the definitive version of the song can be found on the band's first orchestral album, *S&M*, where it comes close to touching Ennio Morricone levels of genius.

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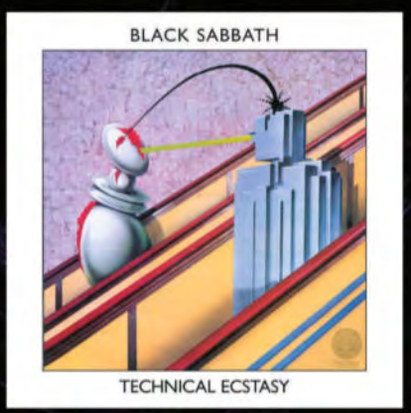

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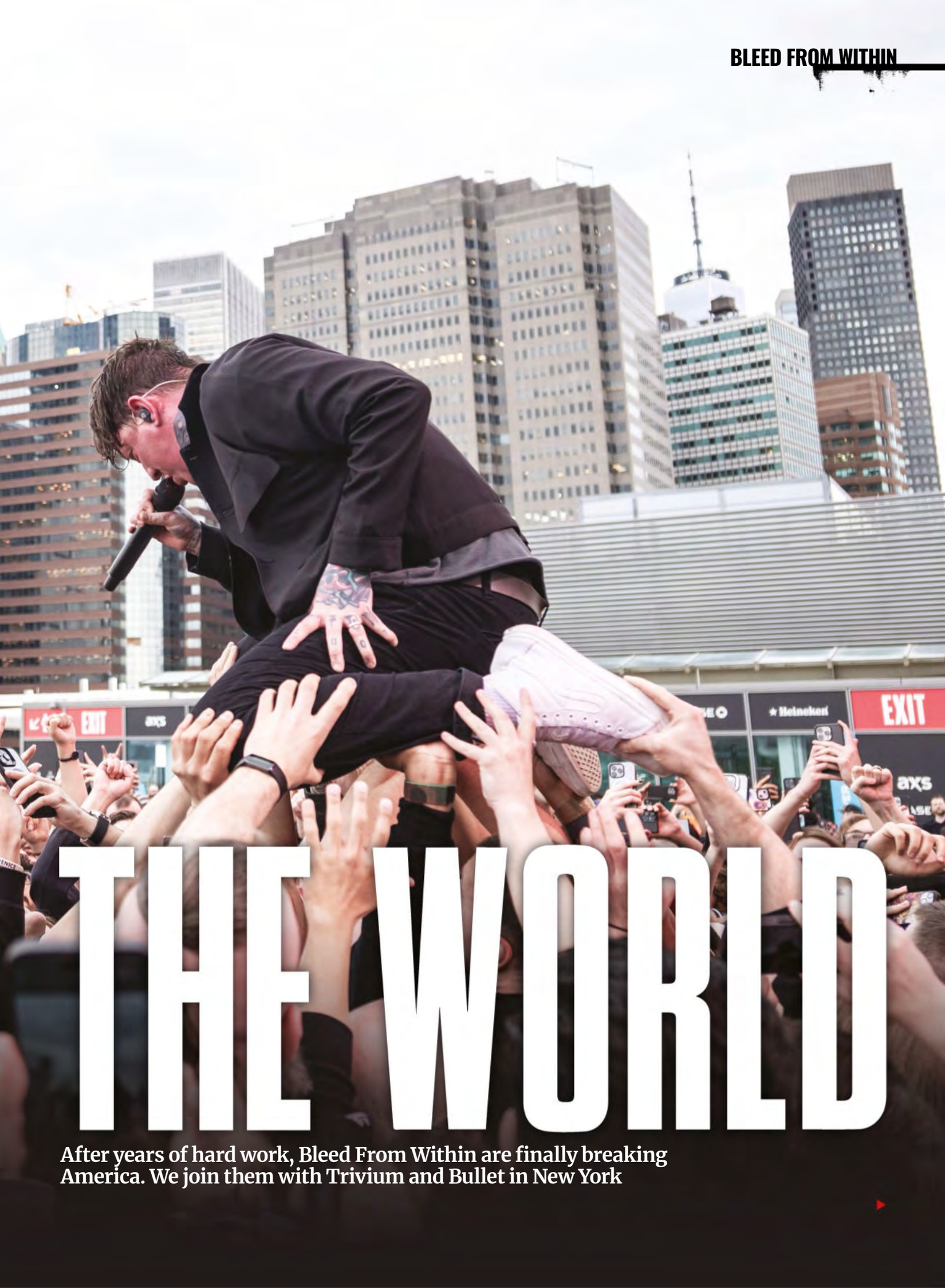


THE WORLD

After years of hard work, Bleed From Within are finally breaking America. We join them with Trivium and Bullet in New York

The Rooftop at Pier 17 is an open-air club atop a building along New York City's East River, which offers panoramic views of the area, taking in the Empire State Building, the financial district and the Brooklyn Bridge. It's a dream setting, in a part of the US that Scottish metalcore band Bleed From Within have been longing to return to since April 2023, which was when they supported August Burns Red with The Devil Wears Prada at Palladium Times Square.

"When you think of America, the first thing that comes to mind for most people is New York," says drummer, tour coordinator and band manager Ali Richardson, from a cosy chair in the dressing room the band are sharing with August Burns Red, on their current tour with Trivium and Bullet For My Valentine. "For a band, playing here is one of the first things on the bucket list."

As Bleed later take to the stage for soundcheck, vocalist Scott Kennedy steps up to the mic, grins, and slowly waves his outstretched arm, tracing the gleaming skyscrapers on the horizon. "Can you fuckin' believe this?" he says.

His query is met by the 'whooka-whooka-whooka' sound of a military chopper overhead.

"You know, it's not so often you're onstage and you see a helicopter," Scott marvels.

Then, Ali bangs his sticks together four times, and Bleed From Within blast into *God Complex* from their heralded new album, *Zenith*. It slays.

Fifteen minutes later, the musicians are back in their dressing room. August Burns Red drummer Matt Greiner fistbumps Scott and tells him they sounded great.

"Yeah, did we?" Scott responds. "I never know what to think when we're playing in a club that doesn't have walls."

"Well," interjects Bleed bassist Davie Provan. "It was great until the vocals came in."

Scott feigns offence. "You're lucky I've got a thick skin," he retorts, and both musicians crack up.

The line has become an inside joke, but it's more than that.

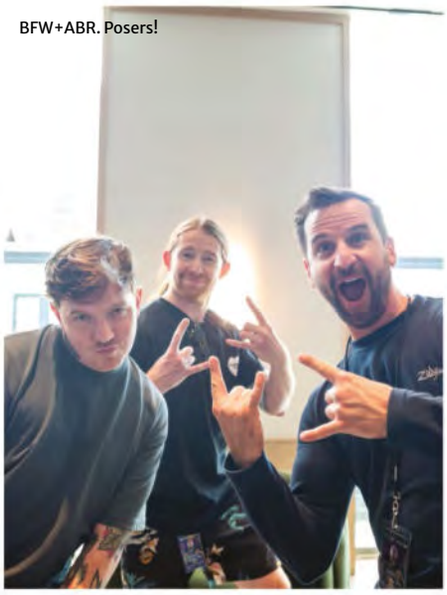
"We say it all the time for laughs," Scott explains. "But really, it's true. Not much can pierce the surface with us, because we've all given each other such thick skin from taking the piss out of each other so much as kids growing up."

That thick skin has gotten Bleed From Within (Scott, Ali, Davie and guitarists Steven Jones and Craig Gowans) through numerous challenges: record label mishaps, line-up changes, and a dodgy merch deal that left them in such severe debt they were forced to put the band on hold for almost three years. When they finally returned, they were pissed off, charged up, and determined to make up for lost time. With their backs against the wall, they evolved into a more eclectic band, writing and releasing the well-rounded *Era* in 2018, and following two years later with the well-received *Fracture* and the more refined *Shrine* in 2022.

A social media endorsement from Corey Taylor, one of Scott's biggest influences ("I lost my mind when I saw that!"), led to a European tour with Slipknot in December 2024. When it hit the OVO Hydro in their hometown of Glasgow, Bleed made headlines by performing *In Place Of Your Halo* with live bagpipers and marching drummers. The tour brought the band more visibility and a new level of acclaim.

With success came pressure, but Scott and Ali agree they work best when they've got something to prove. Hence, the eclectic and experimental seventh album, *Zenith*. For Scott, artistic growth also meant opening up like never before, which is why the lyrics of *Hands Of Sin* are so intensely personal ('*A trail of shattered hearts / Never thought you would go this far*').

Trivium's Matt Heafy gives a pre-show pep talk



BFW+ABR. Posers!

Ali dutifully applies some scribbles

"My sister died a few years ago from drug abuse," he reveals in a rare sobering moment, then pauses for a beat. He doesn't regret addressing the incident, but he's not prepared to elaborate. "I couldn't sit here and have a conversation about my sister," he says. "It's hard to talk about, and I'm not good at talking about my emotions. But I *do* think it's important to talk about in the music, because it helps people, and that helps me. It's like therapy. If I didn't have the band, I don't know where I'd be right now."

A far more life-affirming incident had an equally profound effect on Scott. Three months ago, he became a father. Right after mentioning his daughter, he flips through his phone to show off a new series of baby pictures his wife just sent him, and a video of the wide-eyed, giggly infant with a sizeable crop of hair.

"She used to have *more* hair," Scott says, then laughs. "She sleeps with the side of her head against the crib, so the hair fell out and now it looks like she has a mullet."

Even though he was stoked when Bullet From My Valentine frontman Matt Tuck invited Bleed to join their US tour with Trivium and August Burns Red, Scott spent the first two weeks – 12 shows – at home with his wife and daughter, while Ali's other band, Sylosis, filled the opening slot. Now, 13 dates into the tour as it was originally booked, Bleed are having a blast and looking forward to the final six shows. At the same time, Scott admits that when he hasn't been performing or hanging out with his friends, he has been unexpectedly homesick.

"I never thought I'd feel this way and it's nothing that anyone can prepare for," he says. "I love that little person

The band are hyped to play New York, although sadly minus bagpipers

Nice city, we'll take it!

JEREMY SAFFER

"I WOULD DESTROY MYSELF TO MAKE SURE MY DAUGHTER IS OK"

SCOTT KENNEDY

more than I've loved anything in my life. And I would destroy myself to make sure she's OK. I used to actually think new parents were annoying. And now I get it."

"Yeah, now *you're* well annoying," counters Ali.

The infant has raised the stakes for the entire band. Having fun and playing killer shows is no longer enough. Now, there are financial considerations.

"We're in a different place now," Ali agrees. "Kennedy's the first one of us to have a child, but we all feel responsibility with that. We're thinking, 'Holy shit, we've really got to make this work now.' We want to build up something for her, but then also for our families when we all have kids, whenever that develops. But I mean, we're all family. We always say that she's got a bunch of uncles now, so if anyone tries to mess with her, they're in for a hard time."

As the title of Bleed's new album suggests, *Zenith* showcases the band at their creative peak, combining the trenchant riffs, enthralling breakdowns, melodic hooks and strong song structures of their past three albums, and intertwining them into more compelling, artistic and experimental songs. Originally, the band planned to call the album *Zero*, since they view their last three albums – *Era*, *Fracture* and *Shrine* – as a three-part series composed of musically related (if not conceptually themed) releases. In other words, they wanted to start at ground zero. Then Linkin Park released *From Zero*.

"We had been sitting on the name *Zero* for years," groans Scott. "It was perfect, because it was us going back to our roots and writing music that reflects why we love to be in this band, and also why we started even doing music in the first place."

"We took away any sort of formula, which made a big difference," Ali adds. "In the past, we had safety nets and blinkers on. With this, we just wrote and allowed anything to happen."

Violent Nature opens *Zenith* with a near-industrial passage that wouldn't be out of place in a first-person shooter videogame. Then there's *A Hope In Hell*, which begins with clean, atmospheric vocals and programmed keyboards.

"We've never done that before," admits Scott. "That might freak some people out, but to me it's something markedly different and cool. The thing is, we have developed a sound, but we want to experiment more with it. Steven has a beautiful singing voice. Why wouldn't we take advantage of that and expand what we do?"

As much as he enjoys pushing the envelope, Scott says his main objective was to write songs that would sound great live.

"I wanted to make sure everything would be fun to play live and would immediately connect with audiences," he explains. "You know how when you see a band live and you know all the songs, you always have a great time? We wanted it to be like that, even if people had never heard the songs before."

If being recognised by fans who came mostly to see the headliners is any indication, Bleed From Within are well on their way. As they head to a photoshoot near the venue, they're stopped by several fans and asked for autographs.

Sadi Rahman, 20, discovered Bleed From Within online a year ago, but dove deeper when he found out they were on tonight's bill.

"As far as modern metalcore bands go, I feel like they're one of the few that have different, unique elements to their music," he explains.

Forty-year-old Adrian Leon from New Jersey says he's seen them open for bands before.

"I liked them right away!" he smiles. "They're heavy, catchy and tight, and get you motivated to go in the pit."

Fifteen minutes before Bleed take the stage, Ali is drumming to his streaming playlist on a practice pad, playing complex, syncopated beats to songs by Backstreet Boys, Fleetwood Mac and Phil Collins, while Scott is warming up his voice. In no time, the band are at the side of the stage, ready to go on.

"To be honest, I thought 5:30 was too early for people to be here since it's not our show," Scott says, stretching his arms behind his back. "But it's quite full, and I actually see loads of people out there with Bleed shirts."

As the band's unusual walk-on music (Shania Twain's *Man! I Feel Like A Woman!*) fades, Bleed From Within take the stage and launch right into *God Complex*, which sounds even tighter than it did at soundcheck. The five-song set is brief and brutal, with the crowd getting wilder, moshing and crowd surfing even if they're unfamiliar with the music.

"If you come to the front, make sure you high-five or fist-bump me!" Scott yells.

For the finale, *In Place Of Your Halo*, he climbs into the crowd and performs from atop the outstretched hands of a throng of fans.

"THE STATES IS STARTING TO FEEL LIKE OUR SECOND HOME"

SCOTT KENNEDY

Left to right: Craig Gowans, Davie Provan, Scott Kennedy, Ali Richardson, Steven Jones

JEREMY SAFFER

Scott goes big in the Big Apple

Bros: Scott joins Matt Heafy for *A Gunshot To The Head Of Trepidation*

Enjoying the bright lights of New York City!

After a quick shower, Scott grabs a bottled water and settles into a leather couch in the green room. Clearly, he's pleased by the crowd's reaction.

"There's something about people in the States," he reasons. "They just seem to have a connection to Scotland. We talk to the fans, and a lot of them are like, 'Oh, dude! I'm one-tenth Scottish! I love you guys.' As soon as I say, 'We're Bleed From Within from Glasgow, Scotland,' everyone cheers, and that's the moment they're all on our side."

Unlike many European bands who need to tour America several times every album cycle before they develop a devoted fanbase, Bleed made a solid dent the first time they arrived in 2023 – 18 years into their career.

"Our first show was in this town called Silver Spring, Maryland, and I'll never forget it," Ali says. "Usually, we do a fist bump before we play, but this show felt different, so we all hugged each other, because it was the first time playing a different market and it felt big. If felt special. We started playing and right away we were like, 'What's going on here?' People actually knew the name of the band, knew the songs and were singing along. We didn't expect such a crazy response."

Today, having honed their stage performance to a razor-sharp point, Bleed From Within are in a position to start headlining major venues – even in America.

"We had dreamt of coming here for such a long time, so it was a special moment when it finally happened. And we still feel that way," Scott concludes. "This is our third time in the US, and we're seeing some of the same faces coming out to the show and meeting some of these fans now. It's starting to feel almost like our second home."

***ZENITH* IS OUT NOW VIA NUCLEAR BLAST. BLEED FROM WITHIN TOUR THE UK FROM OCTOBER 10**

Tampa's homegrown heroes, Morbid Angel

PRESS

CHILDREN OF THE GRAVE

How death metal crawled from the swamps of Florida in the late 80s to push noise to new extremes

WORDS: CHRIS CHANTLER

Scott Burns remembers the first time he saw Deicide play live. The exact date has been lost to time but it was sometime the late 80s, and Scott was the engineer at Morrisound Studios in Tampa, Florida – the nexus of the state's emerging death metal scene. Deicide were still called Amon at the time, and were an unknown quantity, hence the fact that they were opening for local heroes Morbid Angel and Nocturnus.

"Nobody knew too much about them," Scott says now. "They come out wearing spikes and armour, they've hung up these effigies of the Virgin Mary, then [singer/bassist] Glen Benton smashes them and they're full of guts and blood and stuff. That was something to see!"

They were animal guts, but if ever something could be defined by viscera and blasphemy, it's the Florida death metal scene. Before the late 80s, the state was most famous for long beaches, retirement villages and Disneyworld. But as the thrashers who had redefined metal in terms of speed and viciousness earlier in the decade began easing their feet off the gas, a growing pack of bands from Florida were snapping at their backs like horde of rabid zombies, bloodied entrails trailing in their wake.

"We were like, 'Slayer brought their intensity level down, here's a place where we can step in and next-level that,'" remembers Deicide drummer Steve Asheim. "Morbid Angel were around, Death, Obituary, Atheist - we weren't the only people thinking it."

In the late 80s and early 90s, the Florida death metal scene pushed music to new levels of extremity, gore and blasphemy, reshaping metal in the process. A musical bloodthirst needed sating, and the Sunshine State was sitting on gallons of the red stuff.

The phrase 'Death Metal' had been coined as a nifty song and demo title by far-sighted teenage San Francisco thrashers Possessed in 1984. Down in Orlando, Florida, it caught the imagination of teenage Possessed superfan Chuck Schuldiner, who soon changed the names of his bedroom project Mantas to Death. Chuck immersed himself in the underground tape-trading circuit, sending and receiving home-dubbed cassettes of rough-edged live shows and demos – including his own – to like-minded fans around the world.

He wasn't on his own. Tampa had produced Morbid Angel, already distinguished by precocious guitar necromancer Trey Azagthoth (born George Emmanuel III). From the same town came Celtic Frost-worshipping schoolkids Xecutioner, later to become Obituary. Sarasota had R.A.V.A.G.E., who would change their name to Atheist and bring a progressive, jazz-infused complexity to this gore-splattered form. In each case, the music they were making was raw and brutal, informed by a love of video nasties, the occult or both.

1987 would see the release of Death's landmark debut album, *Scream Bloody Gore* – the record that truly announced the arrival of this mutant new strain of metal. Chuck had relocated to California to make it, but it wasn't long before he returned to his home state. Florida was rapidly becoming the spiritual home of this brutal new scene. The ace up its sleeve? Morrisound Studios.

Opened in 1981, this humble facility located on Tampa's North 56th Street, between the Rhapsody Ballroom and the Trax Credit Union, had recorded virtually every style of musical genre, but by the mid-80s it was a magnet for Florida metal bands such as Savatage and Crimson Glory.

"We were like, 'Holy shit, all this crazy shit is going on over in Tampa!'" recalls Steve Asheim, who co-founded Deicide (originally Carnage, then Amon) in nearby Clearwater in 1987. "Morrisound was already the place to go. All this heavy metal infrastructure was in place: studio, clubs, rehearsal spaces, music stores. Without that, I don't think it could have."

Scott Burns had been working at Morrisound Studios since 1984, but in 1988 he was asked to work on an album that would turn him into death metal's go-to producer. Having returned from the West Coast, Chuck Schuldiner assembled a new Death line-up featuring members of OG Tampa crew Massacre. The record they made, *Leprosy*, found Chuck already pushing the boundaries of the genre he'd help build. Scott Burns captured a sound as clear as it was heavy - a game-changing combination at a time when few studios understood how to make extreme metal comprehensible.

"Most people thought, 'These guys bark like dogs and play fast, so it's meant to sound like shit,'" reckons Scott. "From early on the death metal bands had a great sense of musicianship and technicality. We made sure the records sounded clean, because why should it sound like shit?"

No one was confusing Death with Bon Jovi or Def Leppard, but *Leprosy* served notice that death metal was here and it was as serious as an autopsy.

"SCARING THE SHIT OUT OF PEOPLE WAS WHAT WE WERE TRYING TO DO"

STEVE ASHEIM

The 1980s were the era of the so-called Satanic Panic, when a self-imposed moral majority spearheaded by the PMRC decreed that metal was corrupting America's youth. Gigs by supposedly 'Satanic' bands were picketed by religious protesters and stickers were plastered on the front of albums warning of profanity and sexual content.

The death metal scene clearly didn't get the memo. While Death were already moving on from their primitive beginnings, Obituary and Morbid Angel were offering splatter movie-inspired brutality and provocative blasphemy respectively with their debut albums *Slowly We Rot* and *Altars Of Madness*, both released in 1989. But a dedication to brutality and controversy aside, all of these bands were coming at things from different angles.

Deicide in 1990: all guts *and* glory

"Listen to any of those first records, everybody sounded different," attests David Vincent, who joined Morbid Angel as singer and bassist in 1986, making his debut on *Altars Of Madness*.

Scott Burns' work on Morbid Angel and Obituary's debuts, cemented Morrisound's reputation as the studio for death metal. The run of killer first albums continued into 1990, with Atheist's *Piece Of Time* and Nocturnus's *The Key* adding technical, progressive dynamics and, in the case of the latter, even keyboards. Less experimental but even more astonishing, Deicide's fiery debut confirmed that a portal to Hell had broken open in Tampa. Even at this early stage, each recording radiated a wholly distinctive force of personality.

"They were all pretty normal," says Scott Burns of the musicians who made up the scene. "I don't remember anybody that was like a criminal bad dude. Some were scarier than others, but I'd bring them all back to my house and have dinner with them."

Not that there was any real camaraderie among the bands. "We all knew each other, but it wasn't so much about the social aspect of it," says David Vincent. "We were really introverted. We just kept our nose to the grindstone."

Thanks to the tape-trading network, underground metal fans around the world were clued in on what was happening in Florida, and labels were quick to catch on. Death had signed to New York punk/metal label Combat for *Scream Bloody Gore*, while Morbid Angel had been picked up by Earache in the UK, and Obituary and Deicide had both inked deals with Roadrunner.

Inevitably, the rest of the world wanted a piece of what was happening down in Tampa. In 1990, Buffalo, New York gore merchants Cannibal Corpse made the trip south to record their

FRANK WHITE

Deicide's Glen Benton looking sharp at 1991's Milwaukee Metal Fest

FRANK WHITE

impressively provocative debut album, *Eaten Back To Life*, returning so many times they eventually relocated to Florida. Another Buffalo band, Malevolent Creation, had already moved to the Sunshine State. After recording 1989's *Beneath The Remains* with Scott Burns in Rio De Janeiro, Sepultura made the trip up to Morrisound for 1991's follow-up, *Arise*. Even grindcore trailblazers Napalm Death made the pilgrimage from Birmingham to Tampa for 1990's death metal-indebted *Harmony Corruption*.

"I remember when Napalm came over, that was a good time," says Steve Asheim. "Scott called us up, said Napalm's coming in, they wanna hang with us. It was all about the metal, that's what mattered. It was like a kinship, it was very cool, and the studio kind of enabled all of that."

For all the chumminess, death metal was still shocking to the outside world. Deicide caused a venue to be shut down for a week when police suspected that ritual sacrifice had occurred during their show due to the animal guts that had been left onstage.

"Crime scene teams picked up the entrails and had them tested - they thought they were human," laughs Steve Asheim. "Scaring the shit out of people was what we were trying to do, so we achieved that!"

By 1990, Deicide were rapidly becoming the most notorious band to emerge from the Florida scene, and Glen Benton was the provocateur-in-chief. As befits the frontman of a band whose name means 'the killing of god', he branded an inverted cross into his forehead. And it wasn't just Christians he riled. During an interview with the *NME* at home in Florida, he said: "I like burning rodents, burning their fucking hair off while they're still alive", while attempting to shoot squirrels

STATE OF DECAY

Ten scorching Floridian bangers of death

Death - Pull The Plug (Leprosy, 1988)
Floridian death metal's first classic anthem for the ages – impassioned, tempestuous and with a hook to die for.

Obituary - Slowly We Rot (Slowly We Rot, 1989)
With that awesome, gut-wrenching tone and John Tardy's guttural vocals, this heaving behemoth remains seismic.

Morbid Angel - Chapel Of Ghouls (Altars Of Madness, 1989)
One of death metal's early masterpieces, a delirious torrent of genre-defining riffs, artfully arranged and blisteringly dispatched.

Nocturnus - Lake Of Fire (The Key, 1990)
Ex-Morbid Angel man Mike Browning formed Nocturnus to scout new cosmic realms of progressive extremity, adding sci-fi soundtrack synths to the death metal assault.

Deicide - Dead By Dawn (Deicide, 1990)
When this oppressively demented, *Evil Dead*-indebted brain-muncher came racing out of the speakers with incredible, furious velocity, jaws dropped into Hell itself.

Napalm Death - Suffer The Children (Harmony Corruption, 1990)
The Brummies became honorary Floridians on this textbook Scott Burns production, mixing Sunshine State dynamics with uncompromisingly crusty aggro.

Atheist - Mother Man (Unquestionable Presence, 1991)
Madly corkscrewing bass and drum interplay, jazzy solos, lyrics about climate change, birdsong samples... Atheist flew their freak flag high here.

Massacre - Corpsegrinder (From Beyond, 1991)
Originally recorded for a 1984 Death demo, Massacre repossessed this infectious barnstormer for their hellraising debut.

Cannibal Corpse - Hammer Smashed Face (Tomb Of The Mutilated, 1992)
These displaced Buffalo natives exemplified the blood-soaked Florida sound as totally as any natives on this chop-happy *Ace Ventura* soundtrack classic.

Cynic - Veil Of Maya (Focus, 1993)
Cynic flung boundaries wide open with this ethereal prog-death odyssey with lyrics rooted in Buddhist philosophy.

Obituary (pictured here in 1990) are still releasing albums today

from nearby trees. He received death threats from radical anti-vivisection groups for his troubles, while one Deicide gig in Stockholm was abandoned after a bomb was detonated in the venue during support band Gorefest's set (no one was hurt, and no one claimed responsibility for the bomb).

"Glen was great at that," says Steve Asheim with no small understatement. "He knew how to wind people up for sure."

While the controversy was entertaining, it never quite overshadowed the music. Chuck Schuldiner, who had helped draw up the death metal blueprint in the first place, continued to push the boundaries of technical ingenuity with each successive Death album, refining it with more elegant, progressive forms. Morbid Angel, Deicide and Obituary all continued to release strong albums, while a Scott Burns production credit was still the stamp of approval for any self-respecting death metal band.

"FLORIDA IS A DEATH PENALTY STATE. THE LAW DON'T FUCK AROUND"

STEVE ASHEIM

By 1993, another provocative regional scene was gathering pace in Scandinavia: black metal. This new movement, centred around bands such as Mayhem, Darkthrone and Emperor, emphasised a rawer, uglier, darker aesthetic. These kids had grown up listening to death metal, and Trey Azagthoth's onstage self-mutilation and Glen Benton's confrontational Satanism undoubtedly pointed the way for black metal's full-throated occultism and antisocial extremity, but this new scene drew a line in the sand. Mayhem guitarist Euronymous even designed an insignia around a picture of Scott Burns with a line through it. The message was clear: death metal was yesterday's news.

"Maybe Euronymous was onto something, perhaps the scene had become stale," reflects Scott. "You could see with newer bands coming out: there's the Obituary riff, there's the Morbid Angel riff. So there was a point to what they were saying."

If anything, the black metal scene went even further than death metal bands had, spiralling into a criminal one-upmanship that culminated in arson, assault and even murder, as these misguided misanthropes attempted to prove their 'evil' credentials. Steve Asheim has a theory as to why that never happened in Tampa.

"Florida is a death penalty state," he says simply. "The law don't fuck around in town."

By the mid-90s, the Florida scene's time in the spotlight had passed, but it infiltrated metal's mainstream in subtler ways. The percussive barrage of Slipknot's early albums bear the scene's DNA.

"Most of my style comes straight from death metal," late Slipknot drummer Joey Jordison once said.

And where Slipknot led, countless 21st-century metal bands have followed without realising where much of the original inspiration came from.

The fortunes of the Sunshine State's big beasts have varied since. Having left his death metal roots behind, Chuck Schuldiner put Death on ice following 1998's progressive death metal opus *The Sound Of Perseverance* to focus on his other, less-deathly, band Control Denied. He passed away in 2001 aged 34 after being diagnosed with brain cancer. Obituary broke up in 1998 (they reformed in 2003), and while Morbid Angel and Deicide have both continued to release albums, they've never recaptured the shock-and-awe potency of their early days. They've been joined by an army of soundalikes, such as Gruesome and Skeletal Remains.

Today, Steve Asheim provides a paradoxically wholesome view of the movement that spawned it all more than 35 years ago.

"Today when I run into these guys, it feels like a high school reunion," he says. "It's good to remember those times with those guys. It makes me feel like we had a real special thing together."

DEICIDE'S *CHILDREN OF THE UNDERWORLD – THE COMPLETE ROADRUNNER YEARS* IS OUT NOW VIA DISSONANCE.
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THE REVIEWS

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Babymetal check all the boxes on their latest adventure

BABYMETAL

Metal Forth

CAPITOL

Kawaii superstars forge a future metal army

SOMEWHERE BETWEEN THE worn temples of old-world metal and the rave-lit coliseums of tomorrow, Babymetal have spent 15 years building a world that feels both impossible and oddly inevitable. *Metal Forth*, their fifth campaign, plays out like a high-velocity, high-stakes experiment in what heavy music could become if it let go of outmoded notions about genre loyalty – smashing pop and metal together not as a gimmick, but as an operating principle. And while not every moment lands with equal weight, the cumulative force is unmistakable.

METAL FORTH IS A HIGH-VELOCITY, HIGH-STAKES EXPERIMENT

It would be easy to sneer at the sheer number of guest spots on *Metal Forth*, but every collaborator is swept into Babymetal's orbit, not the other way around. The three tracks credited solely to the band (*Algorism*, *KxAxWxAxlxl*, *White Flame –白炎–*) are not only strong, they're recalibration points that remind you this is still very much their vision.

That said, the collaborative tracks do form the bulk of the record and speak volumes to the band's cultural reach. *From Me To U*, featuring Poppy, is a savage opener where slashing industrial riffage gives way to soaring vocals and a whiplash blend of rage and beauty. *Ratatata*, with Electric Callboy, erupts with dancefloor abandon and Su-metal's impassioned delivery. Slaughter To Prevail bring in guttural breakdowns and deathcore firepower on *Song 3*, offset by Babymetal's high-velocity melodic switchbacks and a soaring chorus that will detonate arenas worldwide.

The Bloodywood collab, *Kon! Kon!*, is one of the most striking, with its jump-cut nu metal grooves, militant chants, a vicious rap section and a bridge that collapses into a Kami Band siege of death riffs. On *My Queen*, Spiritbox's Courtney LaPlante meets Su-metal head-on,

PRESS/SUSUMETAL (PROGRESS-M). ART DIRECTION & DESIGN: YODAMETAL (ROKUSHIKI)

mixing her signature banshee wails with pulverising djent undercurrents and catchy-as-hell melodic hooks. The bright and playful *Sunset Kiss*, with Polyphia, feels more like a palate cleanser than a mission statement. It doesn't hit with the same urgency, but it reinforces the band's range. *Metali!!*, with Tom Morello, is pure stadium bombast, all traditional metal riffing, shout-along choruses, and a spoken-word passage that explodes into an absolute monster of a chorus.

Su-metal's vocal evolution is a through-line. She moves effortlessly from crystalline melodies to full-throated power, anchoring a sound that's otherwise in constant motion. Moametal and Momometal now feel integral, funnelling chaotic energy like sparks around a livewire. Underneath it all, the Kami Band remain Babymetal's not-so-secret weapon. Without them, this whole thing might collapse into cosplay chaos. But with their chug-heavy riffing, galloping double-kick patterns, neoclassical solos and unrelenting syncopation, the musicianship grounds the spectacle in a metal vocabulary as real and dangerous as anything in the genre.

If *Metal Forth* does overreach, it's in the sheer density of collaborations – an overload that sometimes blurs the album's internal arc. But that same excess is what fuels its ambition: transformation through overload. Babymetal aren't asking metal to follow them. They're asking whether metal has the courage to evolve. And while the answer remains unclear, *Metal Forth* makes the question impossible to ignore.

FOR FANS OF: Bring Me The Horizon, The Prodigy, Motionless In White

JOE DALY

ABIGAIL WILLIAMS

A Void Within Existence

AGONIA

Restless US symphonic black metallers get their bearings

The ever-chameleonic Abigail Williams were once a metalcore outfit who dove headfirst into symphonic black metal with their discovery of the keyboard on 2008's *In The Shadow Of A Thousand Suns*. Aside from mastermind Ken Sorceron, they have had an ever-revolving door of members, each record bringing major stylistic shifts. The cynical might call it trend-hopping, but this sixth album finally feels like a more natural evolution of the grittier BM offered on 2019's *Walk Beyond The Dark*. The riffs are mighty: a smouldering slow-burn in the mournful vehemence of *Talk To Your Sleep*, and ferally speedy in the predatory thrum that drives standout *Still Nights*. It seems Abigail Williams have finally found their venomous groove.

FOR FANS OF: Wolves In The Throne Room, Gaerea, Nachtmystium

TOM O'BOYLE

ACCVSED

Dealers Of Doom

ARISING EMPIRE

German metalcore newbies prove hot off the blocks

Barely 18 months after the release of debut EP *House Of Doubt*, Accvsed are back with their first full-length, and they clearly know their way around the harder elements of metalcore – fast riffs, ferocious vocals and frenetic drumming. *Killer Of Minds* uses lighter synths to decorate harsh screams and fast-paced fills, while *Avoider*'s inclusion of clean singing and more melodic guitars shows that Accvsed don't need to stick to all-out heavy to make an impact. *Make Sure It Hurts* is a beautiful ballad-esque offering, with emotive screams layered over delicate harmonies and clean choruses. For metalcore fans, this is a diverse debut album that will have you hooked from the start.

FOR FANS OF: Landmvrks, Thrown, Resolve

CHERI FAULKNER

THE ARMED

The Future Is Here And Everything Needs To Be Destroyed

SARGENT HOUSE

Hardcore/hyper-pop eclectics turn the crazy dial back up

The Armed are one of the more interesting artists to have sprung up from the underground over the last decade or so. No one knows quite who they are, but their mix of chaotic hardcore, hyper-pop, glitchy electronica and noise rock is a unique and beguiling mix. 2023's *Perfect Saviours* was a little more straightforward-sounding, but this sixth album is a return to their bonkers best. The screaming, squealing *Well Made Play* kicks things off brilliantly, but The Armed still manage to find to find hooks among the bedlam; *Purity Drag* has a singalong chorus next to Dillinger riffs, and *Heathen* is a rabid appropriation of dream pop. There's still no room for compromise – The Armed have their cake and eat it.

FOR FANS OF: Rolo Tomassi, Genghis Tron, The Stooges

STEPHEN HILL

Halestorm are aiming to reach a new peak

HALESTORM

Everest

ATLANTIC

Nashville's stadium-blazing rockers grow fresh roots from familiar ground

FEW BANDS HAVE come charging out of the blocks as fully formed as Halestorm. Right from the beginning, the Nashville quartet knew exactly who and what they wanted to be, and with their 2009 self-titled debut they laid down the blueprint with which they'd build their career. Hook-heavy hard rock, squealing guitar solos and world-class, iron-lunged vocals from singer and guitarist Lzzy Hale are their bread and butter – a formula that has lifted them into arenas, onto main stages, and bagged them a support slot with Iron Maiden this year.

On sixth record *Everest*, things start out the way you expect them to carry on. The band's last album, 2022's *Back From The Dead*, saw them turn in the heaviest, angriest material of their career, and *Everest* opener *Fallen Star* picks up where *Back...* left off, with a metallic riff that quickly settles into a groove, and Lzzy displaying every inch of her power and range.

After that, though, things start to veer off-script. *Everest* is easily the band's boldest work to date, boasting some of their most interesting songs yet, due to some tweaks to the template. Take the labyrinthine title track – a shapeshifter that segues from a slithering, snakelike intro into an overwrought, showy chorus with a mournful lead guitar from Joe Hottinger. It's unlike any other song in their back catalogue. *Watch Out!* sets a new pace for the band; it's a rampant, Motörhead-esque thrash-a-thon, with Lzzy veering between an Alice In Chains drone and screaming blue murder as the rest of the band put their foot to the floor.

Meanwhile, *K-I-L-L-I-N-G* has an almost System Of A Down-ian bounce to its cheerleader chant chorus, and is perhaps the closest the band have come to properly replicating the sheer power of their live show.

Single *Darkness Always Wins* feels similarly out of step. The fist-pumping, triumphant chorus is quintessential Halestorm, made for uniting large crowds, with Lzzy crooning *'We're all fighters, holding up our lighters'*. And yet the journey to get there is less predictable, slowly but surely unfurling from stark keys and a restrained vocal, before a crescendo of squealing guitars is unleashed.

It would be wrong to frame *Everest* as some kind of massive departure. Halestorm are always going to Halestorm, and every track is instantly recognisable as the work of its creators. Heartland tracks include gothic-tinged ballad *Gather The Lambs* and bluesy stomper *Rain Your Blood On Me*. The album closes on the familiar with *How Will You Remember Me?*, a Halestorm 101 ballad complete with inspirational lyrics, as is now their traditional album sign-off.

But with *Everest*, it's clear the band have pushed themselves out of their box more than ever before. There are moments here that will delight fans and undoubtedly become new live show mainstays – and with new flavours abounding in the mix, it's their most exciting, eclectic album yet.

FOR FANS OF: **Alter Bridge, Shinedown, Corey Taylor**

DANNII LEIVERS

PRESS/JIMMY FONTAINE

BAEST
Colossal
CENTURY MEDIA

Denmark's exuberant death metallers add a dose of 80s delight

While Baest's first three albums worshipped at the altar of Stockholm death metal, their sound has always been flecked with a wide variety of metallic inspiration. The Danes have also been impossible to dislike due to their abundant enthusiasm. This has gone into overdrive on *Colossal*, which takes as much influence from *Bark At The Moon* as Dismember's *Like An Ever Flowing Stream*. Though *Colossus* and *Mouth Of The River* boast snorting riffs that reek of the HM-2 glory days, *Stormbringer* and *King Of The Sun* mix ferocity with fiendishly catchy 80s-pop metal hooks. Even on the less blatant *Imp Of The Perverse* there's an infectious swagger and hypnotic twin guitars, while *Misfortunate Son*'s sumptuously memorable lead and the lighters-in-the-air instrumental of *Light The Beacons* are ludicrously enjoyable injections of vibrant blood into the old death metal dog.

FOR FANS OF: Entombed, Kvelertak, Himsa

ADAM BRENNAN

BLESSINGS
Blodsträngen
PELAGIC

Crushing, sludge-laden post-metal battery with an organic touch

As per the band's bio: "The new album begins and ends in the rehearsal studio." This is Blessings' third full-length, and regardless of how much was captured in their practice space, the heart and soul of the four members can be felt and heard beating as one during the dramatic glimmering dynamics of *Through Veils Of Glass And Silica*. The full wrath of a seasoned band reared on the collision carnage of early Isis and earlier Cave-In, and Hawkwind tape loop seminars, is delivered via the sensory assault of *Raised On Graves*. This unit know their nooks and crannies, and the hooky vocals in *No Good Things*, plus the textural impact from the integration of cowbells, xylophones and psychedelic stomp box effects into booming, progressive sludge, gives *Blodsträngen* a sinewy life-likeness, even if discordance and deliberate crushing is the goal.

FOR FANS OF: Isis, LLNN, Cult Of Luna

KEVIN STEWART-PANKO

BLIND EQUATION
A Funeral In Purgatory
PROSTHETIC

Sonic cybergrind terrorists set off too many explosions at once

If you're looking to unwind, you're in the wrong place, as cybergrinders Blind Equation are back with another bite of 8-bit sensory overload. From guttural gothic torment to frazzled Nintendocore synths, *A Funeral In Purgatory* is a nightmarish whiplash of an album. *This Eternal Curse* feels like a cursed 80s Tangerine Dream cut, fouling floating ambience with severe blastbeats and guttural wails, while *Nothing* pits oscillating synths against hellfire panic attack-inducing drum'n'bass. *...In Purgatory*'s assault of death growls and high-pitched glitching feels like submerging yourself in a vat of needles and broken glass, before *Still* softens the album's blows in a mystical oasis of calm. But while there are glimmers of thrilling poignancy amid the mayhem, sadly the erratic clash too often unravels into a murky mess.

FOR FANS OF: Thotcrime, Ozigiri, Drumcorps

EMILY SWINGLE

BORN OF OSIRIS
Through Shadows
SUMERIAN

Metalcore progressives find a grounding amid upheaval

The lead-up to progressive metalcore heavyweights Born of Osiris's seventh album hasn't been smooth. In the past two years they've lost two longtime members, keyboardist Joe Buras and, more recently, guitarist Lee McKinney. Lee remains on *Through Shadows*, however, and the album acts as a fitting swansong. If you want soaring choruses, *Elevate* has you covered. More a fan of their poly-rhythmic guitar riffs? You have *A Mind Short Circuiting*. Fancy a destructive breakdown? Look no further than *In Desolation*. There are a couple of twists too, namely the saxophone that appears during *Activated*, which features Underoath's Spencer Chamberlain, and the chilled, synth-laden interlude that is *Burning Light* – a well-placed breather in among the chaos. Whatever happens to Born Of Osiris going forward, this version has gone out on a high.

FOR FANS OF: Bleed From Within, Tesseract, Shadow Of Intent

ELLIOT LEAVER

Five Finger Death Punch have weathered a lot of storms

FIVE FINGER DEATH PUNCH
20 Years Of Five Finger Death Punch – Best Of Volume 1
BETTER NOISE

Arena metal heavyweights give the hits a bit of spit and polish

FIVE FINGER DEATH

Punch actually making it to two full decades is something of a minor miracle. One of modern metal's most combustible bands, they've had all manner of breakdowns over the years, on and offstage. To that end, a celebration of 20 years of putting out arena metal bangers makes sense, and to the band's credit, they've pushed the boat out by completely re-recording all 14 studio tracks included here, as well as throwing in some live versions for good measure.

Few 21st-century metal bands can stand toe-to-toe with 5FDP when it comes to crafting instantaneous, earwormy metal anthems, and they're here in abundance. But do the new versions stack up? Yes and no. You'd have to go some way to mess up Zoltan Bathory's simple but effective formula of straight-to-the-jugular, post-nu metal riffage, and the hooks carried by the refreshed editions of hits like *Wash It All Away* and *Jekyll And Hyde* remain too good to fail. Some new takes are improvements, too; *I Refuse*, now featuring a welcome bonus appearance from Maria Brink, sounds more grandiose than ever.

But there's just that extra bit of aggy energy missing from the real heavy hitters, Ivan Moody's vocals on *Under And Over It* and *The Bleeding* lacking some of that raw, gritty rage that helped power the band in the first place. The absence of Rob Halford on *Lift Me Up* is understandable, but still leaves the 2025 version lacking a little too, while the inclusion of three covers, as decent as they are, feels a little unnecessary.

Overall, as is so often the case with big re-record projects, this is a solid way to jump into a major band's catalogue for the first time. But really, for the most part, you'd be better off smashing through the originals.

FOR FANS OF: Disturbed, Bad Wolves, Godsmack

MERLIN ALDERSLADE

PRESS

Incite have explored some new territory on their seventh albun

INCITE

Savage New Times

REIGNING PHOENIX MUSIC

Arizona groove/thrash prodigies fail to set the pace

INCITE HAVE BEEN around for more than two decades now, but, seven albums in, they've still yet to release something that makes them an imposing thrash/groove metal force in their own right. On paper, the Arizonans have the pedigree to take off. Frontman Richie Cavalera is from the revered Cavalera dynasty; his dad Max and uncle Iggor were the fulcrum of Sepultura for 13 years, and his brothers Zyon and Igor have both been part of Max's band Soulfly.

However, this four-piece have always felt somewhat derivative. Their influences are clear, but have never resulted in a coherent identity of their own, and their biggest tours have always been whenever they got to support one of Max's projects. Sadly, *Savage New Times* doesn't seem set to change that.

Lies fires things up with a riff as angry as anything from Exodus's or Testament's canon, but the melody is cut short before it can truly resonate. *Just A Rat* aims for the same blunt force yet slows the pace, stomping along like Lamb Of God. However, it lacks the poignant writing of Randy Blythe, with the lyrics hitting like clichéd 80s bluster.

Some songs deviate from those inspirations, only to sound out of place for it. *Used And Abused*'s tremolo-heavy black/death riff shimmers with drama, but feels tacked on to an otherwise boilerplate track, and *Dolores*'s six-minute crawl from slicing lead guitar to ominous arpeggios and then thudding chords seems clumsily arranged.

Though you'll hear plenty worse than *Savage New Times* in 2025, it still feels like Incite haven't quite figured out their personality after all this time. It's an album that won't hurt the band in the long run, and it's unlikely that Max will stop inviting them on the road with him – but don't expect Incite to become household name in the immediate future.

FOR FANS OF: Soulfly, Testament, Shrapnel

MATT MILLS

CHEVELLE

Bright As Blasphemy

ALCHEMY RECORDINGS

Long-running alt rockers experience some highs and lows

This Chicago band of brothers Pete and Sam Loeffler have been going for three decades, respecting their alt rock roots while dabbling in moody, heavy, anthemic, and even sci-fi-themed musical phases. *Bright As Blasphemy* is an edgy but accessible release that leans in on impassioned melody, riffage and emotive vocals, even if a few tracks do fall short. Where *Rabbit Hole (Cowards, Pt.1)* and *Jim Jones (Cowards, Pt.2)* are deliciously dramatic and hooky, the more vulnerable *Hallucinations* and *Blood Out In The Fields* grow a little dreary. Fortunately, *AI Phobias* and *Shocked At The End Of The World* are spirited reminders as to why Chevelle remain so beloved.

FOR FANS OF: Tool, Breaking Benjamin, Seether

NIK YOUNG

DOZER

Rewind To Return: Rarities, Singles And B-Sides

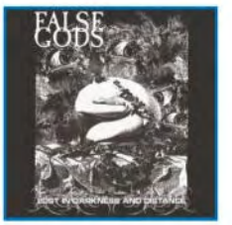
BLUES FUNERAL RECORDINGS

Swedish desert/stoner kings dust down their crown jewels

Featuring a wealth of remastered downtuned, fuzzed-up gems from Dozer's back catalogue, *Rewind To Return* celebrates the Swedes' 30th anniversary in style, and it's a neck-bothering, groove-laden blast. The compilation charts their growth from Kyuss-worshipping hopefuls to more experimental and confident stoner rock heavyweights in their own right. Highlights include the super-catchy, punk- and space rock-spiced 2004 single *Star By Star*, their fun cover of the Misfits' evergreen stomper *She* and the kickass, '98 rarity *Tanglefoot*, which is driven by brooding vocals, a filthy bassline and a blues-flavoured lead riff. An excellent introduction to the world of Dozer, this is a hugely enjoyable romp down memory lane.

FOR FANS OF: Kyuss, Slomosa, Greenleaf

EDWIN McFEE



FALSE GODS

Lost In Darkness And Distance

SELF-RELEASED

Dense, genre-straddling dejection from the Long Island shadows

The underlying musculature of False Gods' music comes from their hardcore roots, but the Long Island, NY quartet have always resisted strict genre definitions. Their 2020 debut, *No Symmetry... Only Disillusion*, was a spiritedly bleak combo of hardcore, crusty post-punk and acrid sludge, while 2022's *Neurotopia* was relatively polished. This third album is a more direct take – less doom-laden pondering, more agitated aggression. State-of-the-world antagonism permeates the thug stomp of *Straw Dog*, the seething self-loathing sludge of *Imposter* and the feral chaos of *Worldless*. Fuelled by a period of "death, addiction and emotional collapse", False Gods have made a brutally distinctive account of their own personal apocalypse.

FOR FANS OF: Crowbar, Biohazard, Eyehategod

TOM O'BOYLE

PRESS/BENALEXIS, BENNKOBRA

FOX LAKE

New Wave Heat

MNRK HEAVY

US hardcore/rap dynamos get primed to spin decks and pits

This energetic Colorado crew bring an aggressive fusion of metal and hip hop with old-school hardcore swagger and rap-rock vocals. Fox Lake's latest release is stuffed with rich riffs, beatdowns, 90s-inspired turntablism and heavy groove, plus a ton of guest collaborations including Mugshot, Avoid, Silent Planet and Eyes Of Salt. The lead single, *Pure Adrenaline*, shows off their 'all gas, no brakes' style, but pretty much all of the tracks here, particularly on the album's second half, have something to offer. As for the standouts, *Savior* should please Rage Against The Machine fans, *Gut Check* is full of hardcore punk heart, and *Headshot* is guaranteed to light up the pit.

FOR FANS OF: Stray From The Path, Fever 333, P.O.D.

NIK YOUNG

HEMELBESTORMER

The Radiant Veil

PELAGIC

Contemplative post-metallers set off on an interplanetary voyage

Belgium's Hemelbestormer are purveyors of a brand of post-metal that coaxes listeners off the accelerator of life's daily pace. Their fourth album allows for a dynamic shunning of the treadmill created by the fury and flurry of a world spinning out of control via a sensational mixture of styles that embraces everything from shoegaze and black metal to early industrial and avant-garde rock. It's all wrapped in crushing but chilled-out, cosmos-kissing, fantastical psychedelia. There's a melodic strength curiously achieved with dual-speed downpicking fed through a shimmery stomp box wringer in *Usil*. *Tiur*'s epic melodic lunges are the manifestation of the painted space scene embellishing the album's cover, and *Cel*'s tribal tectonics are the patterned thumping astronauts could listen to during zero gravity contemplation of the universe.

FOR FANS OF: Russian Circles, Isis, Brutus

KEVIN STEWART-PANKO

IMPUREZA

Alcázares

SEASON OF MIST

Flamenco death metal innovators fight a host of ancient battles

Someone had to do it eventually. We've had death metal with symphony orchestras, death metal with harpsichords... death metal with flamenco guitar was inevitable. Franco-Spanish band Impureza are the ones who have stepped up to the challenge, with *Alcázares* marking their third album to blend roaring extremity with flurrying acoustic notes. It's also their most cohesive fusion of the two to date. A concept piece about the Reconquista – a Middle Ages-spanning campaign by Iberian Christian kingdoms to reclaim land from Muslim caliphates - its metallic stampedes convey the same distinctly Spanish melodies as the undistorted passages, hammered home by rushing percussion and vicious vocals. Impureza have refined their singular genre here, and more albums of this quality could make them essential ones to watch.

FOR FANS OF: Fleshgod Apocalypse, Cult Of Lilith, Dormant Ordeal

MATT MILLS

KAYO DOT

Every Rock, Every Half-Truth Under Reason

PROPHECY PRODUCTIONS

Cult avant-gardists turn all your internal clocks inside out

For their 11th full-length, Toby Driver's Kayo Dot have thrown back to their attention-grabbing debut, 2003's radical *Choirs Of The Eye*. Bringing together the line-up responsible for that post-metal masterwork, while revisiting its compositional processes, the band have birthed a self-proclaimed strain of 'liminal metal', one where classic notions of time come under siege via cloven-footed chamber music. The expansive tapestries on *Every Rock...* disorientate and captivate in equal measure, its parched woodwinds and churchly keys percolating beneath fragmentary percussion and vocals fluctuating from the bestial to the angelic. Meanwhile, Timba Harris's shimmering violin makes a connection with the transcendental ritualism of Toby's Alora Crucible project. Not as immediate or 'heavy' as *Choirs...*, Kayo Dot's latest release is easily its most mesmeric, pregnant with an enigmatic beauty as it confirms that, even after 22 years, they still possess the power to enchant and amaze.

FOR FANS OF: Godspeed You! Black Emperor, Wrekmeister Harmonies, Alora Crucible

SPENCER GRADY

SMALL MERCIES

Where EP is short for 'Epic Potential'

BAELFYR

Empowered By Hatred

SELF-RELEASED

The debut EP from this Peterborough quintet summons all the blackened death metal spirits of evil. The menace of *Rust And Dust* ends with a thought-provoking mantra, while the title track lurches with haunting undercurrents.

ADAM BRENNAN

DARKO

Canvas

LOCKJAW

The final piece of this DIY melodic hardcore quintet's trilogy of EPs provides anthemic and angry closure. The energetic pace, technical fretwork and sincere, urgent vocals make gems like *Dared To Dream* and *Hectic* unmissable.

NIK YOUNG

DEADLANDS

Seven

SPINEFARM

This NY duo, featuring Nita Straus touring vocalist Kasey Karlsen, splice metalcore, djent, nu metal and big, glossy pop. Deadlands will be a new name to many, but they sound genuinely stadium-sized already.

ALEX DELLER

GWAR

The Return of Gor Gor

PIT

Conceptually about a lost, orphaned T-Rex (of course), the latest from legendary shock rockers Gwar is a gleefully batshit and hugely enjoyable attack on multiple senses, with three new tracks that see them on fine thrashing form.

CATHERINE MORRIS

LEONOV

Shape Of Ash

PELAGIC

Maintaining an enigmatic air of suspense throughout this EP, the Norwegians' nocturnal, stranded-in-the-woods doom is by turns intrepid, forlorn and a majestically glacial rite, its metronomic pulse an echo of lost bearings.

JONATHAN SELZER

PHARAOH OVERLORD

Louhi

ROCKET RECORDINGS

Finland's masters of kraut/psych rock continue to evolve. *Louhi* pairs ex-Isis frontman Aaron Turner's liberated growls with two lengthy drone excursions, with microtonal feedback, oppressive repetition and woozy, cosmic trimmings.

DOM LAWSON

Lord Of The Lost have traded some of their glitter for gloom

LORD OF THE LOST

Opvs Noir Vol. 1

NAPALM

Germany's industrial glam stage-stormers retune to their dark side

WITH EUROVISION AND a spell touring with Iron Maiden in their rear-view, the next record from Lord Of The Lost had to be something appropriately ambitious. Enter *Opvs Noir Vol. 1*, the first in a trilogy of albums that ushers in a darker, more melancholic era. The German darkwave metallers aren't reinventing themselves, however; *Vol. 1* is a kind of reintroduction to the band that existed long before they were ever on our television screens.

That's not to say they've left their glam industrial-goth sound behind, but, having previously dabbled in orchestration on the 2015-2020 *Swan Songs* albums, they've now brought that element back, adding a robustness and theatricality that suits the album's grand intent. Opening track *Bazaar Bizarre*, with its pummelling symphonic metal intro, pulsing 80s synths and Chris Harms' unmistakeable baritone, tells you right out of the gate who the band are today.

That convergence of the industrial and orchestral ends of the gothic metal spectrum is a hallmark of LOTL's sound in 2025, and it suits them. The transition from *Moonstruck* – a thrilling symphonic metal anthem with haunting choirs – into the driving industrial beat of the highly danceable *Damage*, featuring Deathstars' Whiplasher Bernadotte, is probably the best example here of the band connecting their past to the present.

They also know how to pick their collaborators. The distinctively sweet voice of Within Temptation's Sharon den Adel on *Light Can Only Shine In The Darkness* lifts the song's instantly memorable chorus, while *Lords Of Fyre*, featuring Feuerschwanz, is destined to be a live favourite on the bands' co-headline tour this autumn.

Opvs Noir Vol. 1 is not a perfect record, and some of the more straightforward, mid-tempo tracks such as *My Sanctuary* are overshadowed by the highlights, but it's a smart, thoughtful and personal statement from the band, with many darkly glittering moments.

FOR FANS OF: Rammstein, Deathstars, Gothminister

CATHERINE MORRIS

KNOSIS

Genknosis

SHARPTONE

Ex-Crystal Lake frontman lets his creative juices run free

A vehicle for multi-instrumentalist and former Crystal Lake vocalist Ryo Kinoshita, Knosis has been releasing material since 2023, but this debut full-length is something special. A raw, experimental project that meshes extreme metal, punk, industrial and djent with diverse vocals and electronic elements, its aggressive, atmospheric songwriting is full of twists. While the more emotional *Kuruibi* and *Tanebi* offer welcome calm, it's the chaotic fury that haemorrhages throughout the rest of the album that takes this home. *Yakusai* and the gutsy *Fuhai*, featuring Hanabie's Yukina, are particularly intricate and abrasive. But *Genknosis* is an exhilarating ride built on pure talent and palpable pain, finally becoming as cathartic as it is enthralling.

FOR FANS OF: Crystal Lake, Deftones, Crossfaith

NIK YOUNG

MARGARITA WITCH CULT

Strung Out In Hell

HEAVY PSYCH SOUNDS

Stoner rock excellence from the home of Sabbath

Birmingham's Margarita Witch Cult scored an instant hit with stoner rock fans with a self-titled 2023 debut that had so many great riffs it almost seemed unfair. The follow-up is even more generously stocked with huge, lurching waves of virile fuzz, delivered with loose-limbed swagger. *Strung Out In Hell* has one foot in the crusty, analogue 70s, and another in the swirling, quasi-occult doom miasma of Electric Wizard. Songs such as *Witches Candle* spark and flare with incendiary rock'n'roll urgency, while *Mars Rover* blends creepy, cosmic occult ambience with a trad stoner rock rumble. An ingenious cover of Billy Idol's *White Wedding* is the cannabis-infused icing on the brownie.

FOR FANS OF: Uncle Acid & The Deadbeats, Monolord, Windhand

DOM LAWSON

OSI AND THE JUPITER

Larvatus

EISENWALD

Ohio's mystic folk fusionists weave sparse magic once more

Osi And The Jupiter continue their mission to combine the folk traditions of their native Ohio and Norwegian mountains. They're on fine form once more, crafting immersive acoustic vignettes that slowly twine around the listener. The grand, melancholic *Saged Incantations* recalls neo-classicists Rachel's and Amber Asylum to leave even the sturdiest souls weepy. *Snake Healer* and *Lurking Beneath The Pines* find the band getting their full Appalachian mope on. If the combo sometimes jars – you're sometimes reminded of those buffet restaurants where you can pile your plate with spring rolls and chicken korma – the band remain eminently capable of drawing you back into their elegant, cello-infused soundscapes.

FOR FANS OF: Heilung, U.S. Christmas, Amber Asylum

ALEX DELLER

PRESS

PSYCHO-FRAME
Salvation Laughs In The Face Of A Grieving Mother
SHARPTONE
Tech deathcore debutants look to make a dent

Having only begun life two years ago, Psycho-Frame are quickly climbing the deathcore ladder. Rather than reinventing the wheel, this US cross-state collective cover it with armour plating and serrated spikes in an effort to crush all before it. Mike Sugars and Colter Cuthbertson's dual vocals add an unhinged, caustic energy to this slickly produced debut, while Aiden 'Dave' Bessent's technical riffs sit alongside hulking, pummelling breakdowns on *Inverted Spear Of Heaven* and *Endless Agonal Devotion*. As is the case with many of the scene's recent highlights, it all makes for a relentless assault, from the opening squeal of *Blueprints For Idol Genocide* onwards. But while the perverse *Filleted And Fucked [S.O.L.]* and *Still Water Salvation*'s blistering drums make for lively moments, Psycho-Frame are still looking for something to distinguish them from their heroes.

FOR FANS OF: Signs Of The Swarm, Suicide Silence, Despised Icon

ADAM BRENNAN

RISE AGAINST
Ricochet
LOMA VISTA
Melodic hardcore mainstays find themselves in need of a bounce

Ten albums into their career, it's starting to feel like Rise Against are running out of steam. *Ricochet* has a rocky start; *Nod* tries to barrel out the gates, but vocally it's lethargic, with a hook where Tim McIlrath sounds out of breath. *I Want It All* suffers similar ills, coupled with sub-par guitar and lyrics. It's hard to reconcile this version of RA with the one that wrote *Prayer Of The Refugee* and *Hero Of War*. Fortunately, *Ricochet* does pick up somewhat for *Forty Days*, but it takes its time to find that sense of urgency they once radiated so naturally. The riffs are mostly uninspired, and vocally Rise Against sound like they don't want to be here anymore. Diehard fans will surely find something to love, but it's not a patch on their classic works.

FOR FANS OF: Bad Religion, Sum 41, Against Me!

WILL MARSHALL

UNLEASHED
Fire Upon Your Lands
NAPALM
Stockholm's warrior veterans prolong the conflict

The most dogged and enduring of Swedish death metal's Big 4, Unleashed have been on the warpath for decades. *Fire Upon Your Lands* is their 15th album, and the continuation of the mythical saga that has informed their last 15 years. Like every previous album, it snorts derisively at notions of progress, preferring to stick dutifully to a rampaging, melodic death assault that is as gruff and gritty as prime Motörhead, but waist-deep in windswept Midgard atmospheres. Everything slays, from blistering opener *Left For Dead* and the brutish *War Comes Again*, through to the anthemic *Hold Your Hammers High!* and poignant closer *Unknown Flag*. Frontman Johnny Hedlund continues to spit every declaration of war with total conviction, thus imbuing the likes of *To My Only Son* with a significant dose of pathos. Ageless, immutable, triumphant, Unleashed are still in a conquering mood.

FOR FANS OF: Grave, Amon Amarth, Asinhell

DOM LAWSON

VARIOUS ARTISTS
The Dogs Of Hope
IODINE RECORDINGS
Killswitch Engage, Snapcase and Alex Skolnick get let off the leash

Metal has always been about community, bonding and awareness of our animal nature, so a compilation that aids the Randolph County Animal Shelter – a no-kill dog shelter in Alabama, which will receive 100% of the net profits – feels perfect. Iodine Recordings have called upon a roster of global metal stars to contribute unheard originals and that call has been answered in full voice, with the likes of Enforced, Orange 9mm and Snapcase all providing the goods. The only real issue with *The Dogs Of Hope* is the sequencing. Going from Walter Schreifels' lilting cover of Pink Floyd's *Pigs On The Wing*, into Testament guitarist Alex Skolnick's face-melting solo *Disruption*, into Killswitch Engage's brooding *Blood Upon The Ashes* is disorientating. There's post-metal next to crossover thrash, and screamo leading into post-hardcore, like a patchwork of metal. But it's for a good cause, so what's not to love?

FOR FANS OF: Dogs, guitars, saving lives

JACK (RUSSELL) TERRY(ER)

PRESS/CELINE KOPP

Sinsaenum offer not an elegy, but a tribute to Joey Jordison's energy

SINSAENUM
In Devastation
EARMUSIC
Bereaved supergroup deliver a classy third sermon

THE BRAINCHILD OF current Kreator bassist and all-round metal polymath Frédéric Leclercq, Sinsaenum have navigated the untimely passing of legendary drummer Joey Jordison while keeping the 90s death metal flag flying with gusto. *In Devastation* arrives seven years after Joey's last hurrah, *Repulsion For Humanity*, but the essence of this all-star band's sound remains the same. This is imperious, immaculate extremity, with a clear debt to Morbid Angel, but with sharper melodic sensibilities and a penchant for muscular, mid-paced and gothic sturm und drang.

There are still moments when Sinsaenum go for the jugular, but this is a more accessible record than either of its predecessors. Co-vocalists Sean Zatorsky (Dååth) and Attila Csihar (Mayhem) maintain levels of incensed, vein-popping fury throughout, and the combination of their voices gives *In Devastation* a feral edge that no amount of production polish could erase. But the incisive nature of Frédéric's songwriting determines the overall mood. For all of their viciousness and grit, *Shades Of Black* and *Obsolete And Broken* are bolstered by deft, progressive touches, haunting vocal melodies and huge, bombastic choruses. More extravagant material take cues from morbid alt rock, the ghostly dark ballad *Last Goodbye* recalling The Cure's *Seventeen Seconds*, but Sinsaenum's urge to propagate a sophisticated, death metal ethos never wavers. With the venomously succinct *Cede To Thunder* and the scathing *Spiritual Lies*, Frédéric cements the idea that his band are a repository for many of extreme metal's aspirational desires, as brutality collides with finesse, and darkness is rendered in eye-frazzling 4K.

It all works beautifully, as a heartfelt tribute to Joey, but also as a formidable statement of intent. *In Devastation* is a deafening and dextrous wake-up call, and one of the most vivid, wide-screen death metal records of the last few years.

FOR FANS OF: Morbid Angel, God Dethroned, Loudblast

DOM LAWSON

LIVE REVIEWS

DOWNLOAD FESTIVAL 2025

DONINGTON PARK, DONINGTON

Korn and Sleep Token make Donington headline debuts for the ages

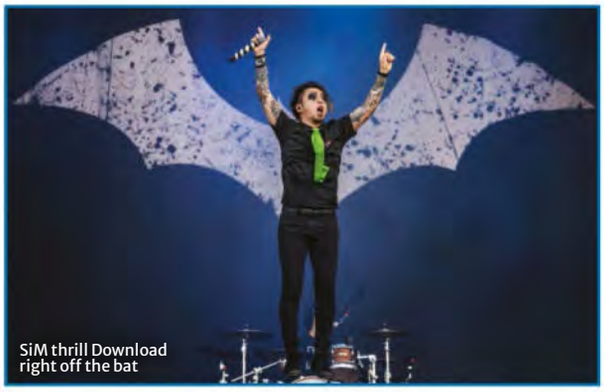
FEW WOULD ARGUE 2024 was a bumper year for Download. Downpours, reports of food poisoning, and shortened sets across the board contributed to a sense that those who triumphed did so against the odds. But come rain or shine, one thing's always sure; the masses will be back at Donington Park next year. So, how gratifying it is to see the sun shining down as Japan's **SIM** open the main Apex Stage with their reggae-punk-metal. There's an air of Skindred to their infectious stage patter, frontman Mah whipping the crowd up and making jabs at their 30-minute set, then being forced offstage before they can finish *F.A.I.T.H.* with Crossfaith's Kenta Koie, Mah quipping, "Next time we'll get longer!"

You don't have to stand next to a devil in pink bunny ears to know Download likes to get weird. The Dogtooth tent is packed as **BATTLESNAKE** leap around in priestly robes, with added horns and wings. It might be capital-f Fun, but the riffs of *Nightmare King* and *Murder Machine* are no joke.

"This is our first ever festival, and it's not even on our home continent!" Texans **GORE.** pull a massive crowd in the Dogtooth, and their brand of metalcore-meets-R'n'B feels potent, swinging between ragers *Pray* and *Sepsis* to the melodic *Doomsday*. **SVALBARD**'s Serena Cherry announces that this is the first and last time you'll see them at Download, as the Bristol metallers are calling it quits. The small Dogtooth tent is the perfect setting for their intense, emotive material that shifts powerfully from aggressive to atmospheric. It's clear evidence of the huge loss that will be felt in their wake.

Over on the second/Opus Stage, Mikael Åkerfeldt is not happy. Technical difficulties mean **OPETH** turn up 20 minutes late, only get to play four songs, and their frontman spends most of his time between those songs wrestling with a "shitty-sounding guitar". Still, a closing *Ghost Of Perdition* makes it all worthwhile.

While Green Day are tonight's headliners proper, the defacto headliners for metallers are **WITHIN TEMPTATION**, closing the Opus Stage. As the twinkling opening of *We Go To War* lures in the masses, Sharon den Adel emerges in an ornate headpiece, the vision of a Greek empress rallying her troops. Her mezzo-soprano vocals battle with soaring riffs and gutturals in a dazzling clash of power and grace.



SiM thrill Download right off the bat

And then, there's **EIVØR**. Although Green Day's loud sound detracts from the nuances of her Dogtooth set, her Nordic folk and electronica mash-up is haunting, beguiling and utterly unlike anything else at this festival.

SATURDAY

A social media post from Matt Heafy sends the rumour mill into overdrive about a possible Trivium secret set to kick off the Opus Stage on Saturday. The masses gather, but... nothing happens. Actually opening the stage, to the *Top Gun* theme, **SOPHIE LLOYD** oozes glam as she shreds, solos and blazes through riffs in impeccable style. She's joined by *Imposter Syndrome* album guests Marisa And The Moths' Marisa Rodriguez and Inglorious's Nathan James on vocal duties, but when she blasts through Metallica's *Enter Sandman*, it's the crowd that take up the vocals, chanting along at deafening volume.

LOATHE frontman Kadeem France looks elated throughout their main stage debut, wiggling his hips and periodically yelling "Big love!" After nearly a year away, and packing genre-bending new material, the feeling's mutual. When your dad's Papa Het, you have a lot to live up to – thankfully, drummer Castor Hetfield has little to worry about. **BASTARDANE** deliver a commendable display of headbangable heavy metal with a grotty garage rock edge, the gut-rumbling drumbeats emphasised by the simultaneous bang of every members' mop of straggly hair.

Fresh from touring North America, Aussie alt/trap artist **KIM DRACULA** has come for the UK. Amid sax outbursts and slap bass, Kim whirls around like a circus freak, and gives fellow misfit Jonathan Davis a shoutout as his recorded vocals play for brilliant collab song *Seventy Thorns*. Unhinged, and utterly compelling.

Nu gaze unit **SPLIT CHAIN** plunge the Avalanche Stage into a thick haze. Their Deftones-inspired sound balances melt-into-your-mattress introspection with a side of restless, tormented grunge instrumentals. Frontman Bert Martínez-Cowles keeps the crowd in check, knocking the tent out of its soporific daze to two-step and roar along to *Bored. Tired. Torn.* Visa issues might have kept Nepalese underdogs **UNDERSIDE** from playing last year, but nothing can stop them triumphing today, as *Right To Hate* inspires a formidable dusty circle-pit.

Throughout her Apex Stage performance, **POPPY** demonstrates why she's fast becoming the queen of alt metal. She flits from anthemic pop-rock choruses to crushing breakdowns and even detours via anime-inspired J-pop. Twirling around the stage in a bouncy red dress, she has a striking presence and coyly insists upon attention while smashing out one of the best sets of the weekend.

Within seconds of **ANAAL NATHRAKH** starting, a circle-pit opens in the packed Dogtooth tent and a crowdsurfer caked in dried blood flies overhead. The next half hour is a howling vortex of blastbeats, snarls and surprisingly anthemic choruses, Nathrakh proving they're not just "the most apocalyptic" band at Download 2025 but also the most thrilling.

A packed Dogtooth gets to see an all-timer of a **CRADLE OF FILTH**

THE SET
SLEEP TOKEN

Look To Windward
The Offering
Vore
Emergence
Alkaline
Hypnosis
Rain
Caramel
The Summoning
Granite
The Love You Want
Higher
Damocles
Thread The Needle
Take Me Back
To Eden

KATJA OGRIN

Sleep Token's rites are tooled up for mass appeal

Opeth's Mikael Åkerfeldt is not a happy bunny

Nepal's Underside finally get their moment in the sun

Svalbard put their back into their first and last Download performance

Battlesnake didn't get the dress-down-Friday memo

Sophie Lloyd revels in her maverick status

Within Temptation charge into action

Kim Dracula engages in some general lunacy

Poppy offers thrills and frills

Lorna Shore raise the temperature

headline slot. Bringing fire to the festival's smallest tent is brilliantly, typically COF, but Dani Filth proposing to his girlfriend after a savage *Malignant Perfection* is a bit of sweetness amongst Cradle's bleak, arcane savageness.

Wind chimes and white noise build into *Look To Windward*, before the curtain drops to reveal a colossal stone monument and pink confetti drifts down. From a door in the centre, Vessel emerges to screams. It's clear **SLEEP TOKEN** understand the weight of expectation that comes with being first-time Download headliners, not to mention being the newest ones in years – and they've gone all-in. There's even a waterfall cascading behind Vessel's piano. *The Offering* brings a surge of energy and Vessel's trademark jerky dancing – reprised during *Emergence*, with its epic sax solo performed up high in the monument – while *that* part of *The Summoning* is, predictably, a high point. But for those towards the middle and back of the field, most likely to be the Sleep Token-curious or simply worshippers who don't want to be squashed in a crowd, the performance doesn't translate. The detail of the staging is lost, and the big screens only show visuals or members distorted by effects, so you don't get a sense of their world or the interplay between them. Tonight is a beautiful ritual, but one that needs rethinking for a mass audience.

SUNDAY

ORBIT CULTURE open the main stage with all the confidence and power of a band who know they're going places – the Swedes inspire circle-pits and walls of death just as everyone's breakfast is still going down. **BLEED FROM WITHIN**'s main stage debut is a crowning achievement. Last year's brief set might have featured celebrity cameos from Romesh Ranganathan and Rob Beckett, but didn't capture the ferocity of their packed-out Dogtooth set in 2022. Massive roar-alongs to songs from new album *Zenith* underscore just how much of a tear this band are on, their set replete with explosions, pits, and even bagpipes on closer *In Place Of Your Halo*.

AMIRA ELFEKY's cocktail of nu metal, metalcore and alt rock has exploded recently, following her collaboration with Architects, but she shows why she's at the Avalanche Stage on her own merit. She exudes confidence throughout *Forever Overdose* and *Tonight*, and the moshpits forming in front of her are a validating response. **JINJER**'s Tatiana Shmayluk emanates an aura of power as she stalks across the main stage, her gorgeously light vocals effortlessly snapping into guttural fury. From *Fast Draw* to the riffy might of *I Speak Astronomy*, it's a top-tier display of progressive metal – and the ever-circling 'Putin wanks on all fours' Ukrainian flag in the pit certainly enhances the experience.

Shavo in Seven Hours After Violet: a lean, mean riff machine

Mix System Of A Down's Shavo Odadjian with members of Left To Suffer and Winds Of Plague, and an *American Idol* runner-up, and you get **SEVEN HOURS AFTER VIOLET**. Their set is a cocktail of crushing metalcore and soaring choruses, *Go!* bouncing with 00s whoops, while *Sunrise* reveals the gang's lusher, more experimental qualities.

"Welcome to our not-so-secret set," grins Alex Taylor, as **MALEVOLENCE** greet a packed Avalanche Stage. With just six songs, it's a short-but-sweet showing and judging from the massive chants and snarl-along of *'Everybody's always looking for a handout'* from recent single *Trenches*, it's high time they get their main stage dues.

A bright, summer's day is really no place for **MESHUGGAH**. The tech-metal pioneers are a brutal force of inhuman sonic carnage, and do their very best to try and decimate any good feelings among the Download revellers. It's impressive as always, but, aside from a few hardcore fans down the front, most people seem pretty disinterested in having their skulls torn apart by the sheer force of the band, and the crowd noticeably thins during their set.

A pit has already opened at the Avalanche Stage before ex-Fever 333 renegades **HOUSE OF PROTECTION** even emerge, and the punch of *Pulling Teeth* sets their gold-standard hardcore chaos in motion. Stephen Harrison is soon down in the thick of it, a circle-pit flurrying around him, and drummer Aric Improta even clambers up the sides of the stage.

Although he leans in on his excellent solo material for the majority of his set, **JERRY CANTRELL** knows that his audience want to hear some Alice In Chains classics. Alongside a fantastic *Cut You In*, getting to see *Would?*, *Them Bones* and a closing *Rooster*, where frontman Greg Puciato does one of the finest impressions of the late Layne Staley you'll ever hear, is a rare treat.

Hot on the heels of Sleep Token's success comes **PRESIDENT**, another masked band with the same management – and the strategy is working. The t-shirts on sale today bill President's live debut as 'The Inaugural Rally', which comes just a month after the release of their first song, *In The Name Of The Father*, but after weeks of hype, and there are huge crowds surrounding the Dogtooth tent. The frontman's identity is a badly kept secret, but his experience

THE SET
KORN

Blind
Twist
Here To Stay
Got The Life
Clown
Did My Time
Shoots And Ladders
Cold
Ball Tongue
Twisted Transistor
A.D.I.D.A.S.
Dirty
Somebody
Someone
Y'All Want A Single

ENCORE
4 U
Falling Away From Me
Divine
Freak On A Leash

Cradle Of Filth are a typically immodest proposal

Amira Elfeky drapes herself in glory

Korn have taken a long, hard road to reach Download headliner status

The crowds flock to Spiritbox on the main stage

Jinjer hit Download on full power

and talent ensures an engaging performance – if you're lucky enough to be able to see it – that matches the fans' early devotion.

As *Fata Morgana* marks **SPIRITBOX**'s arrival, it's clear that they're Download headliners in the making. Courtney LaPlante has astronomically amplified her onstage presence since the metalcore band's 2022 set; whether body rolling her way through *Black Rainbow* or stomping along to *Holy Roller*, she oozes confidence, taunting the moshers, "Did I say stop? NO!!!" And she seals it with a kiss, blowing a smooch as she saunters off.

LORNA SHORE deliver a ferocious and unforgettable set on the Apex Stage. Will Ramos snarls menacingly at the chaotic mass in front of him, while his bandmates blast through their atmospheric deathcore tracks flawlessly. The duo of *Oblivion* into *To The Hellfire* is a masterclass in vocal control and dark orchestral layering, each breakdown hitting harder than the last.

Playing debut album *The Poison* in full, **BULLET FOR MY VALENTINE** opt for the same set they've been touring all year. From the moment *Her Voice Resides* blasts from the speakers, the crowd know the deal, singing along to the classics. However, if you've seen it before, the clockwork set does lose some of its charm.

You have to feel for **SIKTH**. Clashing with Korn's first ever Download headline set is an unenviable situation – frontman Mikee Goodman even tells everyone he was hoping it would rain just as they came on. It's a small but committed crowd that stays for their imaginative tech-metal, with *Hold My Finger* and *Pussyfoot* sounding monstrous. Were it not for the clash, this could have been a big moment.

As he gazes upon Download, Jonathan Davis can't help but grin. *Blind*'s opening line of *'Are you ready?'* is screamed by some 80,000 festival-goers, and can surely be heard from miles around. The crowd start moving immediately, for a largely old-school set that underscores **KORN**'s position as the grandaddies of nu metal – and partying. There's the raw *Twist*, the danceable *A.D.I.D.A.S.* and *Y'all Want A Single*, the stone-cold classic *Freak On A Leash*. The production is equally dazzling. For *Shoots And Ladders*, lights imitate rainfall and Jonathan breaks out the bagpipes. It's a familiar sight, but oh-so meaningful in an inaugural headline set that has been decades in the making.

CHERIE FAULKNER / ELEANOR GOODMAN / STEPHEN HILL / RICH HOBSON / EMILY SWINGLE

Bullet For My Valentine are back on familiar ground

President get the Download seal of approval

Meshuggah are on skull-crushing form

KATJA OGRIN

LIVE REVIEWS

MYSTIC FESTIVAL 2025

GDAŃSK SHIPYARD, POLAND

Sepultura, Vader and King Diamond take Poland's famed shipyards by storm

NOTHING SAYS 'METAL' quite like a post-industrial landscape, so there's no finer setting for Poland's biggest metal festival than amid the shipping containers and looming cranes of Gdańsk Shipyard, as Mystic returns for a triumphant fourth year at the historic site.

The thrum of excitement is set early on the Wednesday as **WITCH CLUB SATAN**'s seething howls of *Fresh Blood, Fresh Pussy* do little to deter the squeeze of flesh into the Sabbath Stage. By the time the Norwegian black metallers strip naked mid-set, it feels less an act of subversive feminism and a necessary survival tactic to escape the miasma of misanthropy, blastbeats and sweaty jiggly bits.

Cracks of lightning pierce the sky as **WHITECHAPEL** smash the living daylights out of the crowd. The new tracks re-embrace their deathcore beginnings but *Hate Cult Ritual* is equally made to be a circle-pit starting gun, brewing their own fearsome maelstrom amid the tempest.

Rob Dukes is clearly relishing his return to **EXODUS**. Stomping and snarling like a wounded beast, his throaty snarl underpins the intensity of *Bonded By Blood* and *The Toxic Waltz*, but arguably even more incendiary is their post-2000s output: *War Is My Shepherd*, *Deathamphetamine* and *The Beatings Will Continue (Until Morale Improves)* are still thrillingly furious.

There's barely room to swing a cat for **NILE**'s Thursday set, but the Egypt obsessives would probably frown on it besides. George Kollias's cataclysmic clatter is the heart of a set that pummels the soul, newer cuts *Stelae Of Vultures* and *Vile Nilotic Rites* every bit as technically astounding as tried'n'true *Black Seeds Of Vengeance*.

Black metal madmen **BEHERIT** are playing their first run of shows since 1992, and the indoor Shrine stage spills over with their devotees. Their bestial primitivism, souped up with power electronics, is a whopping cacophony, before *Pagan Moon* – with its blackened equivalent of an Amon Amarth riff – proves to be shockingly anthemic.

Vader: Poland's death metal royalty are in commanding form

Fellow Finns **ORANSSI PAZUZU** stake a claim as the true heirs to Beherit's genre-ambivalent, mind-addling idiosyncrasy. Frontman Jun-His gives off Satanic cyborg vibes during *Muuntautuja* as he casts his hands like he's weaving invisible strings, and the harsh noise/neuron malfunction of the closing *Valotus* is a crescendo of lysergic delirium.

IN FLAMES might have been surpassed by some of the bands they inspired, but seeing them headline to a massive crowd is gratifying. Anders Fridén's insistence that the set is "all hits" might be a slight fib (No *Come Clarity Leeches*?) but when they hit their stride with a run of *Cloud Connected*, *Trigger*, *Only For The Weak* and *Meet Your Maker*, there's no denying this is the band that made melodeath arena-ready.

GREEN LUNG have left their trademark Dorset Ooser head at home, but "Old English, mushroom-eating heavy metal" opens Friday's main stage, and the boisterous psych rock riffs and exultant Halford shriek coming out of Tom Templar on *Hunters In The Sky* thankfully goes down a proverbial storm.

In the aftermath of yesterday's rain, **EYEHATEGOD** have brought the NOLA swamp with them, turning the shipyard into a totally apt setting for Jimmy Bower's slippery riffs and the hostile stink of *Jack Ass In The Will Of God*, which ups the humidity in the air a few per cent all on its own.

KING DIAMOND's stage show and new characters all themed around new album *Saint Lucifer's Hospital 1920* might be more cohesive if said album actually arrived, especially as *Masquerade Of Madness* and *Spider Lilly* are so damn promising. From the introductory death of baby Abigail though to the cheers that greet Grandma's appearance for *Welcome Home*, this is still a headline set of heavy metal macabre delight, and the King is in flawless voice throughout.

With an exhibition of 40 years of memorabilia on site and having just released "Official Mystic Festival Anthem" *Unbending*, **VADER**'s presence here is massive, and they douse the stage with almighty smoke and fire in an almost mythic display of their status as Poland's patron death metal icons. Bobby Liebling's haunted-Muppet looks have turned him into a meme. But thankfully there's no lack of menace in **PENTAGRAM**'s set, *The Ghoul*, *I Spoke To Death* and *Sign Of The Wolf* delivered with all the fatalistic menace of a descending axe.

However, It's **BLOOD FIRE DEATH**, the supergroup tribute to Bathory formed on the 20th anniversary of Quorthon's passing, that brings the most sense of occasion. Chaired by Watain's Erik Danielsson with appearances from Enslaved's Grutle Kjellson, original Bathory bassist Frederick Melander, and Mayhem's Attila Csihar vomiting forth for the most twisted, soul-eating *Born For Burning* yet heard, it's a set of sacred awe, amid these players all having dedicated themselves to the same cause for this particular black metal spirit that remains very much alive.

SEPULTURA should have been headlining festivals years ago. Anthems like set opener *Beneath The Remains*, *Refuse/Resist* and *Roots Bloody Roots* are embedded into the genetics of modern metal, but the pure ferocious force of *Phantom Self*, *Choke* and *Means To An End* prove they didn't lose the magic touch in the Derrick Green era. If this is how they go out in Europe, it's a colossal high, and a suitably massive end to Mystic 2025.

PERRAN HELYES / RICH HOBSON

THE SET

SEPULTURA

Beneath The Remains
Inner Self
Desperate Cry
Phantom Self
Attitude
Means To An End
Kairos
Propaganda
Choke
Escape To The Void
Kaiowas
Dead Embryonic Cells
Agony Of Defeat
Territory
Refuse/Resist
Arise
Ratamahatta
Roots Bloody Roots

ALL PRESS. BLOOD FIRE DEATH, EXODUS, KING DIAMOND, SEPULTURA: JUSTYNA KAMIŃSKA. VADER, WITCH CLUB SATAN: MARIUS ZKOBARUKOWAL

Sepultura chalk up a valedictory victory

King Diamond: the master of Victorian villany

Exodus and Rob Dukes are bonded once more

Bathory tribute Blood Fire Death live up to their name

Witch Club Satan brew up a tempest at the Sabbath Stage

Parkway Drive: "Guys, there's a reason we don't have pyro"

The Sydney Opera House is an otherworldly setting for metalcore fans

PARKWAY DRIVE

SYDNEY OPERA HOUSE, SYDNEY

Byron Bay's metalcore pyromaniacs swap the fire for an aria

THE SYDNEY OPERA House has hosted many memorable events since throwing open its doors in 1973, but the iconic Australian landmark has never witnessed anything like this. A brutal metalcore band backed by a 42-piece symphony orchestra and 20-member choir is performing in front of 2,500 hardcore and metal fans, who have traded their ripped jeans and band shirts for dinner suits and cocktail dresses. It was clear from the moment it was announced that this would not be your typical fire-and-rotating-drum-kit styled Parkway Drive show, and the fact that the stage is dressed in native Australian flowers and foliage, and that bird sounds are piped through the PA before the show begins, further emphasises the point.

The serenity soon gives way to the choir singing the haunting choral introduction of opener *Home Is For The Heartless*, lending it a sumptuous, gothic weight. Then, frontman Winston McCall roars, *'If home is where the heart is, why do I feel so fucking heartless?'* and the group and symphony explode as one, the violins mimicking guitarist Jeff Ling's nimble solo work.

It takes a few songs for both band – dressed resplendently in black suits – and audience to take stock of their surroundings, and to understand exactly how to act in such a pristine, seated setting. The one-two punch of *Prey* and *Carrion* soon puts paid to that, though, the mix clearing up to unveil the intricacies of the orchestral arrangements as pockets of enthusiastic headbanging and fist-pumping break out across the concert hall.

During subtler tracks, such as the devastatingly emotional *The Colour Of Leaving*, *Cemetery Bloom* and *Darker Still*, the orchestra offers a majestic, cinematic touch. In the set's heavier songs, such as the surging, dynamic *Shadow Boxing* (featuring Indigenous rapper Nooky), *Crushed* (complete with didgeridoo accompaniment from Indigenous musician Brock Tutt), and *A Deathless Song* (featuring Tonight Alive/Hevenshe's Jenna McDougall), the combination of band and orchestra is bombastic, wildly electric and oddly moving. Ben Gordon's drum solo, meanwhile, is leant added thunder by the percussion section.

By closer *Wild Eyes*, the entire crowd is standing and singing its anthemic refrain, as if this most prestigious of concert halls is just another venue, and this just another Parkway show. In truth, it has been so much more – a landmark evening in the band's storied career, one neither it, nor its audience, will soon forget.

ROD YATES

KITTIE

HOLY WARS

THE DOME, LONDON

It's Father's Day, but in Tufnell Park, the night belongs to the matriarchs of metal. It's been 15 years since Kittie last hit UK soil, and judging by the sold-out crowd crammed into the sweltering Dome, they've been missed. Support comes from LA genre-blurrers **HOLY WARS**, who crash in with a short, sharp set of electro-laced alt metal and no shortage of intent. New track *Ceremony* hits especially hard. Then **KITTIE** barrel straight out with *Fire*. The set hopscotches through their history: *Spit*-era bruisers *Charlotte* and *Brackish* slam against the Slayer-tinted new ripper *Eyes Wide Open* and a mid-period *Funeral For Yesterday*, while *Look So Pretty* remains a battering ram of sludge and spite. Nothing's rusted with age; they're fast, fierce, and wickedly tight. Morgan Lander delivers a masterclass in dynamic control, her vocals swinging from aria-pure to scalding. Tara McLeod shreds with ease. Mercedes Lander is all precision. And when the crowd pauses to sing happy birthday to bassist Ivy Jenkins, it's a small gesture in a night full of big meaning. Kittie crawled so Poppy and Spiritbox could run, but with a set that roars and burns itself into the walls, they've come back to snatch the crown for themselves.

HOLLY WRIGHT

SAVATAGE

02 SHEPHERD'S BUSH EMPIRE, LONDON

Anyone looking to prove the axiom that absence makes the heart grow fonder need only listen to the rapturous ovation US progressive/power metal legends Savatage receive, as they take the stage for their first London gig in more than 23 years. In the interim, the band has been in something of an extended hibernation as their sister group, Trans-Siberian Orchestra, routinely sells out American arenas during annual holiday tours. But tonight's show – one of a series of long-overdue comeback performances this year – turns back the clock to shine a two-hour spotlight on one of the scene's most underrated acts. With founding vocalist Jon Oliva unable to tour due to health concerns, Savatage's set tonight skews heavily toward their four records – in particular the mid-90s rock operas *Dead Winter Dead* and *The Wake Of Magellan* – featuring singer Zak Stevens, who works the Shepherd's Bush crowd like a seasoned pro. Still, it's no surprise that the biggest cheers are reserved for anthemic *Oliva*-era classics like *Gutter Ballet* and *Hall Of The Mountain King*, as well as a moving rendition of *Believe* that sees Zak duet with a pre-recorded video of his predecessor. Here's hoping we won't need to wait until 2048 for an encore.

CLAY MARSHALL

PRESS/THIRD EYE VISUALS

Nine Inch Nails reaffirm their visionary status

PRESS/EDMUND FRASER

NINE INCH NAILS

BOYS NOIZE

O2 ARENA, LONDON

Trent Reznor's industrial legends continue to smash perceptions and instruments

WHEN NINE INCH Nails first shot to prominence in the early 90s, their reputation was of a live band that thrived on pure nihilism and total destructive chaos. It's quite incredible to see how they have evolved and adapted three decades down the line, and while that sense of darkness and self-loathing still looms large in Trent Reznor's music, this evening they put on one of the most unique, dynamically vast and beautiful arena spectaculars you're likely to ever see.

A small stage in the middle of the O2 is obscured by curtains as support act **BOYS NOIZE** finishes his noisy DJ set. The second his booming electro house ends, the drapes drop to reveal Trent sitting alone at a piano. A roar from the crowd becomes eerie silence, as he teases out the haunting keys to a beautifully stripped-down *Right Where It Belongs*.

The rest of the band begin to glide onstage alongside him, as *Ruiner* and a remixed version of *Piggy* start the night with a subdued but strong aura. From there, the band make their way through the crowd to the main stage and begin a more traditional **NINE INCH NAILS** set, with the likes of *March Of The Pigs*, *Reptile* and *Gave Up* still sounding as caustic and viscous as they did back in the 90s.

Nine Inch Nails were never going to stick to the tried-and-tested formula, though, and the third act sees Trent return to the middle of the arena with Boys Noize to play an entirely electric, remixed selection of songs, the highlight being Trent performing a booming *Came Back Haunted* as he walks through the awestruck crowd.

After an hour of fucking with the formula, NIN do close on a mini greatest hits set: *Closer*, their cover of David Bowie's *I'm Afraid Of Americans*, *The Perfect Drug*, *Head Like A Hole* and a spine-tingling *Hurt* all coming back-to-back. But, just to show that the feral 90s version of Trent Reznor hasn't completely vanished, his frustration with equipment problems spills over, leading to him destroying multiple mics and one of his guitars. You can take the man out of the 90s...

NIN give the O2 the controls

Ultimately, it provides the perfect balance; one of the most dangerous acts of the alternative era still retain that thrillingly unpredictable edge, but they have the class and the vision to be able to put on a spectacular arena rock show unlike anyone else. A peerless, perfect performance from one of the greatest to ever do it.

STEPHEN HILL

Deftones: Chino Moreno gives the faithful another shot of adrenaline

DEFTONES

WEEZER / HIGH VIS / HEALTH

CRYSTAL PALACE PARK, LONDON

Atmospheric metal icons chalk up a soaring success in south London

THE NU METAL revival is going from strength to strength. Two weeks after Korn headlined Download for the first time and one day after Linkin Park played their biggest-ever concert at Wembley Stadium, Deftones are about to enrapture 25,000 people at a sold-out Crystal Palace Park. Plus, looking around the grounds, it seems that half the crowd wasn't even alive when the Californians released their classic albums.

Industrial rockers **HEALTH** start the day in apocalyptic fashion. The electronic blasts during *Demigods* and *DSM-V* are cataclysmically loud, and the lack of breathing room as the LA trio launch from one song to the next only intensifies things further. Singer/guitarist Jake Duzsik's voice is a gentler counterpoint, but even then he sounds so gloomy that we'd easily believe the end times were around the corner.

Equal parts Oasis and hardcore, **HIGH VIS** stuff their punk rock with plenty of positivity. However, vocalist Graham Sayle isn't burying his head in the sand, finding time to talk about Gaza, the NHS and his personal struggles. That openness only makes South London more invested in their two-stepping antics.

WEEZER seem like a WTF booking until you realise that, like tonight's headliners, figurehead Rivers Cuomo is a 90s alternative icon with roots in heavy metal. The four-piece present themselves as the same geeks with rock star aspirations that they've been since their landmark debut, unloading hard riffs like *Say It Ain't So*'s while the backdrop displays sci-fi and videogame-inspired imagery. With such nostalgic hits as *Buddy Holly* also in their canon, they draw a dense, invested crowd.

DEFTONES commence with a murderer's row of anthems – *Be Quiet And Drive (Far Away), My Own Summer (Shove It)* and *Diamond Eyes* – and instantly get this crammed turnout jumping. It says everything about the band's back catalogue that the momentum doesn't dip, even after that explosive start, with deeper cuts *Headup* and *Rosemary* igniting cheers of joy. *You've Seen The Butcher* and *Rocket Skates* brutalise thanks to their walls of eight-string guitar, before a particularly cosmic *Hole In The Earth*, accompanied by videos of planets and asteroids, stills onlookers in awe.

Chino Moreno is in marvellous form the entire time, screaming and humming with equal ease despite having cancelled the previous day's Glastonbury set over health concerns. The cathartic chorus of *7 Words* sees the frontman and his audience unite in energetic harmony one last time, before the baggy-shirt-wearing, fishnet-sporting masses spill back out into the capital.

MATT MILLS

FAETOOTH

CWFEN

THE BLACK HEART, LONDON

The atmosphere tonight at the sold-out Black Heart is heavy with dry ice and blue light, rendering the whole scene otherworldly. In step **CWFEN** from the mists of Glasgow, hot off the release of their debut album, *Sorrows*. For a band that's only existed since 2023, their live presence is already impressive. They command their surroundings with the certainty of a much more senior group, their heavily reverbed, luminous post-punk sound pairing with the haunting, moonbeam-like lights. Tracks such as *Reliks* and *Embers* are a careful alliance of aggression and more dulcet tones, and, paired with the strangely hypnotising movements of singer Agnes Alder, they leave the venue utterly enthralled. **FAETOOTH**'s self-defined "fairy doom" has seen the Californians become rising stars of the underground. But while their sound is enticing on record, *Echolalia* and *White Noise* feel hollow in comparison tonight, as the band struggle to find the balance or any dynamic push and pull between their doom and shoegaze influences. Vocalists Jenna Garcia and Ari May sound subdued, riffs that should take on a hypnotic intensity rarely rise above the monotonous, and what should have been a triumph sadly ends up below par.

KIARASH GOLSHANI

TETRARCH

THE FLAPPER, BIRMINGHAM

So far as first appearances go, you could do a lot worse than The Flapper. It might be sweatier than Apollos's jockstrap for the first UK show of nu revivalists **TETRARCH**, but the fact the 180-cap venue is directly over from Birmingham's Utilita Arena – a venue that's hosted Iron Maiden, Ghost and Slipknot in the past six months alone – is surely a hot poker up the ass for any ambitious band. And Tetrarch certainly are that. Drawing heavily on the best of nu metal, their offering of bouncy riffs, killer hooks and thick grooves soon has the room singing along. Vocalist Josh Fore clearly bristles with pride as he admits he can't believe how good it feels to hear their songs roared back, and the cheers for every lick, twang and solo by guitarist Diamond Rowe speak to her star quality. Bounding cuts like *Anything Like Myself* and *Stitch Me Up* are broken up with feral intensity in *Negative Noise, I'm Not Right* and *You Never Listen*. It's still early days for Tetrarch but, even at this stage, it feels like anything could happen. Well, it wouldn't be the first time a band has gone from Birmingham basements to conquering the world.

RICH HOBSON

STEPHANIE EVANS

Iron Maiden bring the power(slave) and the glory back to East London

JOHN McMURTRIE

IRON MAIDEN

HALESTORM / THE RAVEN AGE

LONDON STADIUM, LONDON

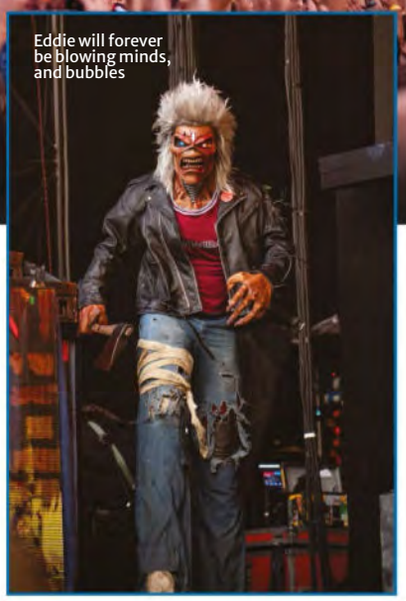
Heavy metal's indefatigable troopers host a 50th anniversary homecoming

IT'S PARTY TIME in East London, the birthplace of Iron Maiden. On a treacly hot day, the British legends are celebrating 50 years of active and fruitful service by commandeering West Ham's London Stadium and turning it into a heaving maelstrom of slightly pissed and rowdy joy. Up, as they say, the Irons.

Earlier in the day, **THE RAVEN AGE** and **HALESTORM** put in enjoyable shifts as the audience trickles in, and somehow manage to keep the energy in the venue up, despite the fact that atmospheric conditions can, at best, be described as squelchy. But as the PA suddenly crackles into life, and UFO's *Doctor Doctor* bursts forth, the roar of adoration from the now vast crowd is absolutely fucking deafening.

Many of Iron Maiden's recent tours have been notable for extravagant productions, but this time they have opted to keep things relatively simple. Evocative animated/AI-tinged films, sometimes in eye-blitzing 3D, loom from giant screens at the back of the stage. They are littered with references to Maiden folklore, and yes, we *could* be drowning in nostalgia here, but when Maiden launch into the opening *Murders In The Rue Morgue*, they could hardly sound more vital or ferocious.

Tonight focuses on Maiden's first set of halcyon days, from 1980 to 1992. An embarrassment of seminal riches, everything from early anthems *Killers* and *Phantom Of The Opera*, to ubiquitous gems *Hallowed Be Thy Name* and *The Trooper*, are delivered with thunderous verve. An uproarious *Run To The Hills* is sandwiched between labyrinthine epics *Rime Of The Ancient Mariner* and *Seventh Son Of A Seventh Son*. *The Clairvoyant*'s joyous, progged-out pomp is followed by a startlingly heavy *Powerslave*. Maiden are on magnificent form.



Eddie will forever be blowing minds, and bubbles

In truth, they could easily have taken a prolonged break, to allow their first new member in 25 years to settle in. Instead, drummer Simon Dawson seems to be doing absolutely fine already. As Maiden stride through one of the greatest setlists they have ever put together, any fears that songs would sound different or weird evaporate. Simon's shrewd and skilful performance is wholly respectful to Nicko McBrain's style and legacy, and yet he seems to have given the whole band a jolting shot of fresh energy too. It's OK. He can stay.

It ends with *Wasted Years*. The entire place sings their hearts out. Maiden's homecoming has been an unequivocal triumph. Happy anniversary, you absolute heroes.

DOM LAWSON

Fit For An Autopsy: deathcore 101 for a world experiencing a 404

FIT FOR AN AUTOPSY

NECKBREAKKER / MUTAGENIC HOST

THE DOME, LONDON

New Jersey's deathcore destroyers put on a biblical display of power

IF YOU'RE FEELING like death in the immediate aftermath of Download, tonight's bill has your back. **MUTAGENIC HOST** have a firm grasp of the murky power that still lies in death metal's old school, starting their set with who-dares-wake-me-from-my-slumber riffs so stagnant you can feel the barometric pressure rising in the room. Tonight, though, the Londoners are torn between competing impulses, seeking a middle ground between the atmospheric wretchedness of pre-prog Death and a more contemporary urge to fill up all the available sonic space with dense, satisfyingly crunchy, if less horribly effective grooves.

Even if the Dome is still filling up when **NECKBREAKKER** take the stage, the young bucks clearly know how to command any size of crowd, gathering everyone to the front of the stage and playing with the kind of unbridled, upbeat enthusiasm that black metal was invented to put an end to. Frontman Christoffer Kofoed's new... Bieber-ish haircut is a sign that they're not beholden to any death metal code, however, and all the varieties of bounce animating the likes of *Putrefying Body Fluid* and *Shackled To A Corpse* make it clear that there's a hardcore band with a penchant for Slayer riffs not just lying very close to the surface, but often clambering all over it. The non-partisan audience demonstrably loves every second of it, the whole scene an example of what a band with momentum looks like.

As with Neckbreakker, **FIT FOR AN AUTOPSY** are playing off the back of a Donington set, but this is a band long road-tested to optimum destructive capacity. Moshpits form the moment *Lower Purpose* kicks in with those riffs holding Meshuggah down for a count of 10, and if there's not much of the way of audience interaction from frontman Joe Badolato, that only adds to the sense that this is deathcore as an implacable force of nature.

Admittedly, Fit For An Autopsy are still operating within the parameters set by others. Their set runs variously through juddering Lamb Of God grooves; In Flames/Soilwork triggered double-bass blasts like being smacked by a revolving array of rubber paddles; and oof-really? Gojira-isms, albeit largely confined tonight to a closing *Two Towers*. But the sheer musculature and conviction running though every note makes them sound towering in their own right. Through *A Higher Level Of Hate* mauling you as if you were Stretch Armstrong to the battle-worn deliverance of *Hostage*, it may be the deathcore rulebook, but it's thrown down with the force of Moses at the foot of Mount Sinai.

JONATHAN SELZER

COUCH SLUT

DEATH GOALS

DOWNSTAIRS AT THE DOME, LONDON

There are different ways to make ugly music. For **DEATH GOALS**, it involves barrage after barrage of breakdown-stuffed aggression. The UK 'queercore' duo have an early start time, but their rampant tracks ignite everyone in earshot, with crowdsurfers and moshpits going haywire during their 30-minute set. The passion is only furthered by singer/guitarist Harry Bailey's intense speeches, his anti-war and pro-LGBTQ+ stances clearly shared by the crowd. **COUCH SLUT** are less brutal, but more unsettling. The stage lights are dimmed and turned red for vocalist Megan Osztrosits and co., who offer a series of darkly absorbing and mid-paced noise-punk tracks. The New Yorkers are more restrained than usual; there's none of the graphic backdrop imagery or self-flagellation with microphones that made their show at 2024's Roadburn a startling standout. If anything, Megan seems – shock, horror – *happy*, sharing jokes with the crowd about ex-partners and recent touring mishaps. That joy does nothing to hinder the immersion of the songs, however, and 45 minutes feels like half the time by the time they're done. A diverse yet always hideous-sounding evening.

MATT MILLS

DETHKLOK

PARTY CANNON

02 SHEPHERD'S BUSH EMPIRE, LONDON

Tonight, the Empire has been tossed into the hyper-violent *Metalocalypse* universe, the much-beloved animated show from Adult Swim satirising all things metal. Its globe-dominating protagonists Dethklok have finally landed in the UK after a 20-year wait. Openers **PARTY CANNON** introduce their own brand of surrealist death metal, featuring a push-up pit and a pool inflatable bonanza, proving just enough to sate the waiting crowd. Then the carnage commences as **DETHKLOK** burst in with a sonic onslaught. In the foreground, the band of real musicians gallop through their repertoire while the music videos synchronise perfectly behind them, lightly sprinkled throughout with various sketches. Series creator/frontman Brendon Small impressively handles both vocal duties and rhythm guitar with dextrous flair, while human drum machine Gene Hoglan blasts through songs like he's Dr Rockso on one of his benders. The likes of *Murmaider* and *Briefcase Full Of Guts* have the crowd moshing to the most ridiculous subject matters, but the musicianship on display becomes as enthralling as the multimedia pageant. Tonight is a celebration of extreme metal absurdity that could only come from those truly committed to the cause.

KIARASH GOLSHANI

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Spiritbox are on magnetic and monstrous form

LINKIN PARK

SPIRITBOX

WEMBLEY STADIUM, LONDON

California's alt metal torchbearers re-up their rebirth

AS EMILY ARMSTRONG unleashes that massive, Chester Bennington-alike scream during *Heavy Is The Crown* – seemingly a song about the weight of taking over from such a beloved frontman under such difficult circumstances – you're reminded how remarkable it is that Linkin Park are back, let alone doing their biggest-ever headline show, at Wembley Stadium.

But first, **SPIRITBOX**. They're a much heavier prospect, and by the time the brutal closing trio of *Soft Spine*; *No Loss, No Love* and *Cellar Door* rolls around, some in the crowd look seriously stunned. Nevertheless, with arresting sci-fi visuals and Courtney's magnetic presence, it's a spectacle no one can look away from.

As *Les Misérables' I Dreamed A Dream* fades out, and the onscreen countdown clock hits zero, it's time for the main event. Mirroring their 2024 comeback shows, Linkin Park open with the nostalgic punch of *Somewhere I Belong* and *Crawling* – although now, the former also comes across like an anthem asking people to accept Emily. Many here were kids when they discovered the band, and have brought their own kids along. But when debut Emily single *The Emptiness Machine* arrives, the onscreen visuals change from black-and-white to colour, while rainbow lasers shoot down, perhaps in a subtle nod to their rebirth.

Like last year, the show is split into four parts and an encore, but features songs from comeback album *From Zero*. *Two Faced* feels like an old favourite, Emily and Mike singing side by side with undeniable onstage chemistry. There are smiles all-round; Mike reads a message in the "native tongue of the country he is visiting" ("Oi! It's a cracking night for a fooking show, innit!") and gifts a fan a hat, while Emily plays guitar for *Over Each Other*. Meanwhile, fans commemorate Chester by lifting their lighters for *Lost*.

But it's the songs from *Hybrid Theory* and *Meteora* that still hit hardest. *That* scream-along *'Shut up!'* bridge of *One Step Closer*, and a goosebump-inducing late-set run of *Numb* (given a reggaeton spin by request of a fan), *In The End*, *Faint*, *Papercut* and *A Place For My Head*. It all ends with that *Heavy Is The Crown* scream, and the euphoric catharsis of *Bleed It Out*.

Tonight is not so much a victory lap as a lesson in moving forward after tragedy, and finding joy in community – and it's amazing to think there are girls in the crowd who might grow up to become a Courtney or an Emily. LP 2.0 are a roaring success.

ELEANOR GOODMAN

BEN GIBSON

FIVE MINUTES WITH

JONATHAN DAVIS

KORN

Poodles! Parakeets! Bearded dragons! The nu metal pioneer bloody loves animals

WORDS: RICH HOBSON

You've just launched Freak On A Leash, a line of pet accessories with designer Ashton Michael. Where did the idea come from? Presumably you're not sitting around thinking of *Falling Away From Me* superglue and *Twisted Transistor* boomboxes?
"It was my girlfriend, actually. We've always loved dogs. When we got together, she had a wonderful white poodle named Sheepy and I had a boxer lab named Kaos. I was thinking, 'How cool would it be if we could dress our dogs in shit that we would like?' Pet stores have generic dog collars, leashes and stuff like that, so we were wondering where the cool stuff was."

And the name...
"Was a no-brainer! We thought it'd be fun and cool to do something for dogs. We wanted to share our love for animals with the world and dress them in alternative clothes."

It's safe to say you're a dog guy over cats then?
"I've had cats. Y'know what the fuckin' kicker is? I'm deathly allergic to dogs. We have this Moyen poodle and he's hypoallergenic, his name's Dante and I love that dog more than anything in the world. This is the first time I've had a hypoallergenic dog. Kaos would make me wheeze so bad, I'd get asthma attacks... all this shit. It was worth it, because I loved him. But yeah, I had cats too and they could be just as bad. They were a little more tolerable because they'd be outside more, but if I touched my eyes I was fucked. All that said, we need 'em – pets make us live longer."

What pets do you have these days?
"Dante, a bearded dragon called Lady, and a fish called Mermaid. But we've had all kinds. I've raised three boys, so I've had every kind of animal that wouldn't drive me too crazy or put me in a hospital bed. But Dante is my boy, he's black and brown, and he brings me so much joy. I wake up and he's attached to me until I go to bed. He'll come with me to go get coffee, we do everything together when I'm home."

"WE NEED PETS – THEY MAKE US LIVE LONGER!"

What was your favourite pet when you were growing up?
"Pete the parakeet. I couldn't really have many animals – the only things I wasn't allergic to were the fish or bird. My earliest childhood memories are of spending time with my parakeet – we had him for years and years until he passed. I loved that bird."

You've finally headlined Download festival! Did it feel long overdue?
"It's about fuckin' time! Thirty years, finally! Ha ha ha! I'm so happy – we headlined the second stage and whatever over the years, but it's special. I love playing Download. Our biggest show in the UK was last time we were over in [London's] Gunnersbury Park – that blew me the fuck away."

What was it like, going out and seeing that many people still losing their minds for the band?
"It was amazing. We've played places like Brixton Academy and gone up and down from there. It feels so good to be at this level again, doing what we love."

Korn have gone from the outsiders to the band for outsiders.
"It's why I do what I do. I could probably retire happy now, but every time I see those kids' faces, hear someone say, 'Your band saved my life, it got me out of a really dark place', *that's* the reward I want. I'm glad the misfits have an outlet. Fuck, I needed that – my bands were The Cure and Duran Duran, the New Romantic shit."

Do you ever miss the wild old days?
"I came from both sides, man. There are things I miss about the old way – when labels used to support a band, they really used to put their money behind you to do cool, groundbreaking things. Now, you've got to be creative and figure out how to do things without that money to achieve it."

Like playing a gig on a plane? [To support 2005's *See You On The Other Side*, Korn took fans up in a plane and played a short gig.]
"Oh man, that was amazing! I always wonder, 'How the hell do we pull these things off?' I was singing over the PA with these battery-powered amps. We were the first to do it – a whole show on a plane, flying over the Atlantic." MH

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PRESS

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